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WEST

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The Men Who Fought for Texas

A Hundred Years Ago

DEAD MEN SINGING

By

H. BEDFORD–JONES

1 THE BUFFALO HUNTER

A COLD, blowing night in Texas, near the Guadaloupe River. Dawn was threatening the pale stars. A strange singing sound reached me, yet for miles around was no human presence. Startled, incredulous, I listened.

Again and again, now fainter, now clearer, drifted the sound of voices. It came from nowhere, from everywhere; from the thin clouds, from the chaparral, from the very ground. Then suddenly the lilt grew upon me, the words became distinct, as though the singer were passing close by me but invisible:

"We were hunters and politicians, soldiers, half-breeds and scouts,
Preachers and clerks and gentry, gamblers and country louts,
Lawyers and ciboleros, wandering to and fro—
And by God, sir, we fought for Texas a hundred years ago!"

And then—I could have sworn to it—through the darkness from nowhere came a burst of rough, ribald, bawdy voices swelling and dying away again down the night upon a rush of ghostly hoof beats:

"Here's to you, Cibolero, damn your eyes!"

Cibolero? The swing of the word fascinated me. What did it mean? What were these voices from the prairie? True, the Texan war for freedom had started close by here at Gonzales, in 1835, a hundred years ago.

THE Cibolero reined in his shaggy horse, alert for a repetition of the laugh. He was a rangy, thin-faced, bearded man, very brown, clad in ragged buckskin. His Comanche moccasins rasped in the wooden clogs of his Spanish stirrups. He held a long rifle poised across his saddlehorn, poised and cocked, ready.

The harsh laugh came again. Then a hideous, unspeakable scream that drove across the sunlight to chill the very blood.

Somewhere below lay the waterhole, invisible. Here the naked rocks blazed with heat. The entire Puercos Valley shimmered and danced with heat waves, clear to the hot blue mountains. The downpour of sunlight was parching, furious, intolerable.

"All right, stranger!" rose a voice. "Water up and welcome, but keep that rifle low. You're covered."

The Cibolero let his eager horse go on down the steep descent. The trail turned very sharply. The waterhole came into sight, twenty feet distant. The Cibolero halted dead, as another harsh laugh greeted him, and the scene.

"Bet ye never heard a 'Pache holler afore! Well, this 'un did."

The Cibolero stared at a short, squat man of forty, wearing stained buckskin and an enormous sombrero wound with tarnished silver braid. Muttonchop whiskers, Mexican style, and small shrewd eyes flanked a huge hooked nose.

At this man's feet lay a bound and naked Indian, still quivering, as a snake

quivers long after life is extinct. At one side were two dead horses and an old, rickety wagon, and against the wheels lay four dead bodies—Mexicans, perhaps pulque hunters. Two men, a woman, a young girl, all naked and dead. The men were much cut up; Apache raiders believed in removing the source of future generations.

The squat white man obviously cherished the same belief. As he held up his red knife and chuckled, the Cibolero felt a little sick.

"Yeah, he hollered when I give him his own med'cine. This was the only one of the three we didn't down first crack; we let him set for a spell, and by gosh, it got his nerve! Ye see, three 'Paches had jumped these here folks, then we jumped the 'Paches. Well, stranger, light and water up. Seen you coming for quite a spell, and Red Sky figured you for a white man. Kirker is the name, Jim Kirker."

The Cibolero dismounted and gave his name.

"Nathan Jackson?" Kirker repeated. "Why, say! You're the feller they call the Cibolero—the buffler hunter! Proud to grip your claw. Come on out, Red Sky; no need to worry about him. The Cibolero, huh? Thought you was up around Santy Fé?"

WITH a nod, the Cibolero followed his horse to the water, and after a drink made unhurried response.

"Yeah. I'm headin' down into Texas to see some friends o' mine."

"Just come from Bexar myself. There's hell to pay in them parts." Kirker stooped and deftly removed the scalp of the dead Apache. Another figure emerged from among the rocks; it was that of a lithe, pock-marked Indian, to whom Kirker jerked his thumb.

"Say, Cibolero, shake hands with Red Sky. Delaware from York State. Him and me are in business. If it goes good, we'll ketch in more of his folks."

"Business?" the Cibolero repeated, puzzled. Kirker nodded, and going to one of the dead Mexicans, removed the scalp and regarded it critically. Then he grinned.

"This ain't so bad; can't tell it from 'Pache hair noways, if ye lift it right. I dunno about the gal, there; the hair's too soft, maybe. Red Sky, trim up the woman's pelt a bit, and mind your eye."

"What in the devil's name are you about?" the Cibolero demanded.

"Making money. I seen Gin'ral Cos down to Bexar; him and me are friendly. I'll get a reg'lar contract out of Santy Anny for 'Pache scalps—hundred dollars per each. The joke of it is," and Kirker grinned, "they can't tell Mexican from 'Pache scalps! So me and Red Sky will profit. Ye see, I got in trouble over to Chihuahua; the governor there put a bounty of nine thousand dollars on my head. Ain't that a brag? Well, Cos has fixed things up. I ain't a outlaw no more and everything's fine. Where you heading for?"

"Gonzales."

"Huh! I reckon you know them Texians are out to raise Cain?"

The Cibolero shook his head. From his pouch he took a strip of jerked meat and began to chew at it.

"Nope. Santa Fé is a long ways from San Antonio."

"Bexar, you mean. The mission's San Antonio, and the town is Bexar. Ain't you heard that Santy Anny is military dictator of Mexico?"

"Yes. That's no news."

The two men fell into talk, and the Cibolero, for the first time, began to comprehend what sort of trouble was going on here in the State of Texas, which was now largely settled by Americans, frontiersmen who lived by the rifle. Entire colonies had come in, formed by Austin and others, to take up Texas land. Texas was now a state, governed by its own representatives down at Coahuila—or had been until Santa Anna became dictator.

Santa Anna had abolished the state legis-

latures and the constitution of republican Mexico; as dictator, he was supreme. He had crushed all opposition with savage hand. The Texians alone were in resistance, which thus far had been passive, to his program. And the attention of Santa Anna was now turned to them.

His brother-in-law, General Cos, had come to San Antonio with strong forces and was proceeding to disarm all citizens in Texas. The representatives at Coahuila had been flung into prison, such of them as did not escape. Delegates from all over Texas had met at San Felipe to form a new state constitution, within the republic of Mexico, demanding that Santa Anna recognize it. His reply was to jail those who brought him the message, and to issue imperative orders to General Cos.

"And them Texians," observed Kirker, "they holler that they ain't going to be disarmed, and they mean it. Likewise, them greasers mean business."

THIS was the most ominous thing; the Mexicans did mean business. Their troops and artillery held Texas powerless. Their possession of San Antonio de Bexar, the one large city in the state, gave them a base of action. The half-organized settlers had no troops and no money. Some, like Sam Houston, were all for cutting loose from Mexico and forming their own republic, but the masses were awed by the idea of fighting a disciplined power, as well they might be.

"They sure are a-getting their mad up, though," said Kirker, chuckling. "Dragoons are being sent out all over the country, gathering in rifles and so forth, and having trouble doing it. I hear that land is being grabbed, too, which looks bad. If there's any real war started, these here Texians get wiped clean, right down to the cradle. Santy Anny aims to kill off all foreigners that disagree with him. So steer clear of sojers."

"I'm not looking for trouble," the Cibolero said. "I want to find some folks I know. You don't reckon any real war will start?"

"Sure to start. Me, I ain't no Texian. It's no skin off my nose if them settlers gets too brash and are wiped out. I got my own affairs and stick to 'em."

"Hm! I guess that's sensible. Did you happen to hear anything about a family named Sisson? From Pike County, Missouri? Last I heard, they were heading for Gonzales to take up land near there."

"Nope. There's a sight o' folks in Texas, and I ain't met only half. What about a horn of liquor? I got a jug of prime stuff cached with our horses."

"No, thanks; I must move on." The Cibolero drank again, filled his water bottle, and gave his horse a last short drink. After all, he reflected aloud, the settlers would have too much sense to provoke the wrath of Mexico. With this, Kirker disagreed.

"Seems like they're all politicians, Cibolero, on one side; and on t'other, crazy galoots spoiling for a fight. Like that feller Jim Bowie. I tell you, them Texians are right quick to take up a scrap, somehow! Them that ain't politicians, of course. Well, luck to you! And mind your step, too, if you meet any sojers."

The Cibolero nodded and mounted. As he rode off, he turned for a last look at the waterhole. The two men there were spreading their trophies in the sun to dry.

HEADING straight for Gonzales through the wilderness, the Cibolero rode on, day after day, keeping well to the north of Bexar, as San Antonio was generally known. Gradually the desert and mountains and naked rocks fell beyond the horizon; slowly the lush river country of grazing herds and settlements opened ahead. But as he rode, the Cibolero grew more and more uneasy.

He did not like the new day that had come to Mexico with Santa Anna; a hard, ruthless, lecherous man who had done great things for himself. Gone were the old courtly Spanish customs, the friendly in-

tercourse with Yankees; a new breed had come into power. And thinking of Jenny Sisson as he rode, now and again fumbling at the paper packet sewn inside his buckskin shirt, the Cibolero frowned and worried.

On a day, he came out abruptly upon a new settlement north of Gonzales, a cluster of cabins whose bark was still green. A lean brown hunter, in tattered clothes and coonskin cap, was perched on a stump, waving his arms and yelling excitedly, while a whiskey jug went around the circle of listeners. The Cibolero could hear his voice from afar.

"What's it mean? No gov'ment without representation, I tell ye! Us Texians has got to stand up for our rights! Us Texians——"

"Hey, Dick!" shouted someone. "Since when was you a Texian, you N'awleens 'gator?"

The brown man whirled savagely. "Since when? Since I seen them two Brown boys shot down, over on the Nueces

River—shot and then ripped with lances. And for why? Wouldn't give up their rifles, that's why! And if you'd heerd the gal screaming from the cabin, too, it'd ha' been enough. Right then, by God, I become a Texian and I stays a Texian! And if you boys don't tote your guns down to Gonzales——"

He broke off suddenly, as the Cibolero came riding up. The voices ceased. Men turned and stared; women peered from cabin doorways. Eyes and faces were suspicious, questioning, alert. One could never be sure nowadays. The Cibolero drew rein.

"Howdy, folks." At the homely words, all tension relaxed. The Cibolero swung out of the saddle, leaned his rifle against a stump, and stretched. "By gosh, I come all the way from Santa Fé, boys. Got a drink to spare?"

Already they were surrounding him eagerly, aflame with curiosity. From Santa Fé, that unknown, distant city of song and story! The Cibolero expertly swung the jug on his elbow and lifted it to his lips. Presently he handed it back.

"Prime stuff; obliged to you. What's all this talk about trouble?"

A MOMENTARY silence. Then the agitator spoke up.

"What? You mean to say as you don't know about it?"

"Santa Fé is a long ways," and the Cibolero smiled. "I reckon I'm a lot ignorant, folks. Say, did any of you ever meet up with some Pike County settlers by the name of Sisson? Last I heard they were headed for Gonzales——"

"What?" broke in the speaker eagerly. "Pete Sisson and his old woman, and the two gals? Why, I stayed two days with them folks! They're a spell out of Gonzales on the crick road. Sisson, he's got the rheumatiz bad; he's all crippled up. And that oldest gal, Jenny—maybe you're the feller she was allus talking about? The buffler hunter?"

"Reckon I am, mister; I usually go by the name of the Cibolero. I've come a right smart ways to see them folks, too."

"Hurray! That gal allowed you'd join up, if you was here!" The agitator was upon him, breathless, pouring forth excited words. "Listen here! That goddam Gin'ral Cos, he's a-sending sojers, a hull passel of 'em, up to Gonzales. They figure to grab everybody's rifles, and the old brass cannon they've got at Gonzales too——"

"Hold on, this is all new to me," exclaimed the Cibolero. "What for are the guns being grabbed?"

"What for? Tyranny, by God!" With a scream, the brown man leaped back to

his stump. "That's what I'm a-telling you folks—tyranny! We got a right to bear arms. It's in the Consitution back home. Us Texians have got it in our state constitution here, but now that's all smashed to hell. There ain't no more state gov'ment, hear me? Just Santy Anny. They're taking our guns everywhere. They put Steve Austin in jail—yeah, Austin hisself! They got us Texians in jail all over, they're a-grabbing farms and saying land titles ain't no good, and we got to fight!"

"We can handle any greasers that come this way," said a skeptical settler.

"Yah! You boys set on your hunkers and say it ain't your business," yelled the brown man. "By God, it'll be your business when them lancers come this way, you bet; first you know, you got a lance in your belly! And you women folks in there, you'd better light a shuck for the woods when them dragoons show up—by God, you had! None of your business, huh? None of Davy Crockett's business, neither, but he's on the way——"

"What's that?" shouted somebody "Colonel Crockett from Tennessee?"

"Himself, and a many more like him. I tell you, hell's blazing down to Gonzales! There's a new gov'ment being set up to San Felipe, and we got powder and guns coming in from N'awleens——"

The uproar rose again. The Cibolero went to one of the cabins, obtained a cornpone and a strip of side meat from a woman, and listened while he ate, with a mental shrug. It was none of his business, as a matter of fact. He was not a Texian. The names spouted by this agitator meant nothing to him. Jim Bowie, Travis, Austin—these men, proscribed by the new Mexican government, were unknown to him. His only Texas interest was the girl Jenny from Pike County. At thought of her, he touched the packet under his shirt, and a smile crept into his eyes.

He had nothing against the Mexicans; up in Santa Fé, he had many friends among them. Not that he blamed these excited, blaring Texians for sticking by their guns and resenting oppression; but he was like Jim Kirker. It was no skin off his nose what happened in these parts. These fellows had settled in Mexico with their eyes open. So many of them had settled here in Texas, indeed, that they had pretty well crowded out the Mexicans.

As to atrocities, he judged that the stump orator was full of whiskey and exaggeration. "See you in Gonzales!" he sang out, when he mounted and rode on. A chorus of voices made response, and rifles were brandished; they were getting worked up, all right.

THAT night he ran into a one-man camp. A traveler was roasting a wild turkey over a tiny fire, and hailed the Cibolero delightedly. A wandering preacher, this, who had left his Bible in Nacogdoches and was carrying powder—in his saddlebags, his pockets, hung to his belt, stuffed everywhere.

"So you never heard o' Sam Houston?" observed the preacher, as they talked. "Well, just wait! Down to San Felipe, where them aristocrats are settled, they got a gov'ment all ready. Houston, he writ the constitution; he's all for secession from Mexico, but that's too much for most folks to swallow. Now that they're calling it treason to have rifles, I dunno. I hear the Mexicans are grabbing farms and land, too."

He shook his head at the Cibolero's frowning question.

"Killing? I dunno. I'm a-heading for Gonzales. I hear Gin'ral Cos has sent an army to disarm the folks there. They got an old brass cannon, a four-pounder, to use against the Comanches, and Cos aims to get it. Texian? You bet I'm a Texian. Come from Kaintuck three months ago. Ain't you waiting the night?"

The Cibolero was not waiting. After an hour's sleep he mounted and rode on; he was growing more uneasy about Jenny and her folks. It did look as though some fire underlay all this smoke. A preacher toting powder—that was funny. Talk

about conventions and politics meant little to him; it looked like these settlers had all gone crazy.

He rode hard, careless now whether his horse lasted or not. He came into Gonzales of an evening, worn out, starving, his horse exhausted. To his amazement he found the little town of straggling log cabins and adobe huts in a blaze of light from bonfires, aflame with voices and excitement. He had anticipated seeing hundreds of settlers gathered here, but he found only a few dozen.

Someone caught him as he half fell from his horse. It was Deaf Smith, a scout whom he had met in the Western country, and who greeted him vociferously.

"Hey, Cibolero! Here's a jug; drink hearty. Just in time, you old grizzly! Them sojers is camped acrost the crick.

Hey, everybody! Here's a Texian for you—come all the way from Santy Fé to get in the scrap!"

Men gathered excitedly. The Cibolero drank, and the liquor set him on fire. War? Yes; the brass cannon was ready, the Mexican soldiers were here, the morrow would see fighting! Voices roared on every side. Beneath the wild exuberance lay a deeper note; these men were scouts, settlers, Indian fighters, not mere talkers. Their excitement was backed by a grim purpose. Disarm? Not a bit of it!

More drinks, and a bite to eat. The Cibolero felt himself swept along with the tumultuous stream; he was amazed to hear of what had happened in Texas lately, of how the whole people were taking arms. War? It was a certainty. None the less, he pursued inquiries about the Sisson family and found several who knew them well.

Yes, old Pete Sisson was bedridden. He and his folks had not come into town. He was friendly with the greasers anyhow. The Cibolero got a description of their place and the way thither well fixed in his mind, then let it all wait. He was done up, the liquor was good, the Sissons were safe—and here was fighting on the morrow. He must stay and see what happened. Mexican faces, too. He was newly astonished at how many Mexicans sided with the Texians. It was all a muddle to him. By midnight, however, human endurance had reached its end. He was snoring fast and hard, the world forgotten.

SUNLIGHT wakened him, and a wild outburst of voices. He sat up, reached for his rifle.

"Pile out, pile out, everybody!" came the shouts. "River road, all hands! Hurry!"

The Cibolero staggered out into the sunlight. Dust was rising in clouds, men were riding furiously. No time to seek his own horse; he caught the first saddled beast in sight, swung up, and pounded off in the wake of the straggling riders.

There was the river. Across the stream, on an eminence, the Mexicans were camped. The horses splashed through at the ford. Voices rose; a parley had taken place. A screen of oak trees shut off everything ahead. Now Deaf Smith appeared, shouting at the men. Some dismounted and went crashing ahead on foot to where the little brass cannon was placed. The Cibolero found himself turned to the left, with a number of other mounted men.

The open ground came suddenly in sight, and sudden startled silence fell. The breeze blew the dust away. A bugle was shrilling, the enemy were in sight; lines of cavalry drawn up, lance-points a-glitter in the sun, blue and red uniforms, brass dragoon helmets, gold-laced officers. Car-

pines, discipline, against a ragged line of riflemen.

Deliberately, the Cibolero left his weapon unloaded. It was not his fight; he was here to look on. He heard voices all around; treason, no quarter promised, the cannon was ready. Everything was a muddle to the Cibolero. He stared, realized suddenly that the lines of cavalry were wheeling to bugle calls, were on the point of charging.

Then—crash! The brass cannon roared out. A wild yell rang down the Texian line. Men leaped from cover and started across the open, madly charging the lines of cavalry. Rifles began to speak, the explosions running to right and left. Powder smoke hid everything. The bewildered Cibolero could see little until the dust and smoke thinned. Then amazement seized him. Wild yells pealed up, yells of triumph, of ferocity, of exultation.

Those disciplined ranks were gone, shattered, blown like leaves on the wind. Men and horses lay rolling or kicking. The officers had turned tail, the dispersed dragoons were in wild flight. With sudden relief from their tremendous tension, the Texians burst into cheers, oaths, hysterical laughter. Somebody pounded the Cibolero on the back.

"Licked 'em! What'd I tell you? One Texian can lick ten yeller-bellies any day! Smashed 'em with one volley—look at 'em run!"

Someone yelled something about Lexington; others took up the word, for these men had not forgotten the Revolution. Licked them! Texians could stand up to the boasted cavalry of Mexico and lick them all at one volley! The thing was proven at last.

CONFUSED, the Cibolero finally found his way out of the frenzied scene. There would be no more fighting; the fun was over. The Cibolero climbed aboard the first horse he saw and went riding away. It was all over now; he could go and find Jenny at last. He was so filled with this thought, that he paid little heed to the horse, until he realized with many a curse that it was an old, slow, jaded beast. However, no matter! A new eagerness had replaced the thrill and quick excitement of the battle in his heart, and his eyes were alight.

Jenny and her younger sister, their ma, old Pete Sisson, all waiting for him! He had a present for Jenny safely sewed inside his shirt, and his fingers sought it anew. A lace scarf that had come from Mexico City. No doubt stained with sweat and dirt by this time, but it would wash. And how her pretty face would beam at sight of it! Almost seventeen was Jenny, and high time she was married.

"And she will be now, quick enough!" muttered the Cibolero happily. "I'll jerk her out of all this mess. No Texas for me! Just because a bunch o' cavalry gets licked, these Texians think all Mexico is their meat. They ain't got sense enough to know that Santa Anna can throw twenty thousand prime troops at 'em, with cannon to boot. And he'll do it, too. Just like Jim Kirker said. He'll wipe 'em clean."

The sun rose higher, and the skinny old horse shuffled along. The Cibolero, remembering the landmarks given him, made no mistake. After a long time he came into a trail, and saw a lance lying in the dust. An eight-foot lance, the shaft two inches thick, the razor-keen head three inches across. He frowned; riders had come this way, Mexicans! Just as well that he had not fired his rifle. Might have need of it yet.

They'd learn something if they monkeyed with him. A harsh laugh came to his lips. A new contempt for Mexicans had arisen within him; more correctly, a contempt for their fighting ability. There were good fighters in Mexico, yes, but not among these soldiers, the scum of the cities, many of them convicts. Such men disarm the Texians? Not likely. Well, it was not his business. He was no Texian.

A DISTANT patch of green, a line of thick trees; there was the creek. A trickle of smoke was lifting, and he sighed in happy relief. That was the place, all right, and everything was quiet. Cooking dinner, most likely. Jennie's hot-bread would sure be welcome, and a horn of liquor as well. The Cibolero realized all of a sudden how thirsty and hungry he was. Until this moment, he had been too excited and eager to think of it.

Gradually the trees grew nearer. The thicker, denser clump forming a windbreak about the cabin took shape, as the Cibolero rode among the outlying oaks and nut trees. He drew rein, suddenly; he sat listening, wondering. Then he swung to the ground and turned in among the trees, and halted.

What was it, off there to the left? A man's voice, assuredly, cursing and laughing; then came a queer choked, panting gasp. Something was moving over there, crashing among the berry vines.

"Hi!" called the Cibolero gaily. "Hi, Jenny! That you hunting bear——"

A wild, wailing cry came to him in response. A cry that actually froze something within him. From that instant he was a changed man.

A figure came plunging forward, the figure of a girl; no, not Jenny at all, but her sister. Running, mouth wide open for breath, hardly a rag on her body; and behind, thrashing along and swooping to clutch her, a soldier. A Mexican. Now he had caught up with her, and one swiftly choked scream burst from the girl.

The Cibolero had been momentarily paralyzed by all this. He wakened abruptly, let his rifle fall, and forgot it as he flung himself in among the vines. Not until this instant did the other man realize his presence, but it was too late for defense. The Cibolero saw that there was fresh blood on the uniform tunic. He saw nothing else, heard nothing at all, until he found himself standing in the drifted sunlight beneath the trees, with what was left of a man hanging in his hands.

He wakened. He was dimly aware of a thin screaming that had now ceased; this soldier had been crying out. He let the limp thing fall, and his eyes went to the girl, widening in horror. She lay there unconscious on her back, her small breasts heaving above her panting lungs. Upon her face was a smear of blood, though she seemed unhurt.

"Hola, Ramon!" A voice came to him as he stood, a distant laughing voice in Spanish. "Fetch the little one in, hombre! Share and share alike, comrade——"

A shiver seized upon the Cibolero. He swallowed hard, stared down for a moment at the unconscious girl, then his head came up. He turned and strode back to the trail, where he picked up his rifle and primed it. An old Kentucky rifle, this, long and heavy and beautiful; it had been the pride of his life, until now.

FORGETTING his jaded horse, the Cibolero struck off along the trail, on foot. He made no effort to hide. The very heart and soul was frozen fast within him, yet his eyes were burning as he strode. Jenny, Jenny! Nothing else mattered.

The clearing grew and fell open before him; in the midst of it was set the log cabin. At one side grazed horses, saddled cavalry horses. Six men were gathered, eating and drinking, at a table under the umbrella tree in front of the cabin. Ma Sisson had always wanted a table under a tree, he remembered.

She would want it no more; that, nor anything else.

A glance showed him everything as he advanced. She lay just outside the doorway, one arm over the breast of Pete Sisson. He had fallen on the threshold, a rifle still clutched in his hand. She must have been cut down as she caught him; a saber must have done that frightful thing. Only an axe or a saber——

And Jenny, Jenny!

The Cibolero halted, and the breath came from his nostrils in a low whistling groan. He saw her white body for the first time in his life; all her sweet body, stretched there at one side, but not all white now. She was limp and dead. He knew the sight of death instantly.

"Madre de Dios!" A voice jerked out the startled words as one of the men about the table caught sight of him.

They saw him, all of them, saw him and leaped up; they were crying out, clutching at weapons. The Cibolero's eyes cleared.

He said nothing, but lifted the rifle and slowly pressed the trigger. The white smoke spurted.

The Cibolero reversed the rifle and swung it up, as the other five came running at him. No matter if the hot barrel burned his hands; there was a worse burning in his brain. The foremost soldier pitched down to the blow, and the walnut stock of the rifle snapped off short. The Cibolero remembered that a Kentucky rifle always acted this way if clubbed; somebody had told him as much. No matter. He had no more need of it.

The remaining four were upon him. His forgotten knife came out. There was a flash, a play of glittering steel in the sifted sunlight. Under their combined rush, the Cibolero tottered and lost balance, and was borne backward.

But as he fell, his free hand gripped one of those men close and hard.

The dust swirled. A wild sound rose out of the dust, a bubbling scream, as a man flung himself frantically aside. He got to his feet and ran toward the horses; his whole face was split by a slash across the cheeks, and blood dribbled down over his tunic. He got to a horse and after a while clawed his way into the saddle. The other horses followed as he rode away and there was none to stay them.

The other three soldiers lay on the ground with the Cibolero, and tried vainly to flail clear of him. He had flung his long arms about all three, gripping them very tight, and in one body his knife was buried to the hilt; this man did not thrash about for long.

The Cibolero glared into their sweating, pallid features, their bulging eyes. Two of them; no more. He knew that the wounded man had ridden away; he realized it clearly, and was unworried. There was no haste. He would get that man later. Now he was gripping the two living men and the dead man very close, so close they could not use their weapons. Not that he cared a snap about their knives. He felt nothing. He was no longer capable of any bodily feeling. Desperate, they made frantic efforts to get clear of his grip, and could not.

Of a sudden, the Cibolero shifted himself. He moved his body, and flung their whole weight sideways, rolled them over. Swift and agile as a panther, he unexpectedly loosened his hold on them. He got clear, gained his feet on the instant, and was reaching for them as they scrambled up.

From the two men burst hoarse panting words, incoherent oaths, appeals, frenzied cries. They still had their knives.

THE Cibolero caught hold of them as they came up, one hand to each slim brown throat, and his fingers sank into the flesh. The third soldier, with the knife still buried in his back, slid away and lay quietly in the dust. The Cibolero stood up to his full height, dragging those two with him, holding each of them by the throat.

They used their knives, but he felt nothing at all. Every sense was dead within him, everything except the one driv-

ing urge. His long arms swung the two heads together with a crunch.

One of the soldiers wailed out terribly, though his voice soon died. Again and again the long arms moved them apart and brought them together. Presently, however, the Cibolero realized that they were like limp dolls in his grip. He looked down, his brain cleared, and he let them fall. They sprawled in the dust like two heaps of old reddened rage.

One had got away. He remembered this with a stab of hurt in his brain, and swung around. Once more he caught sight of the white, twisted dead body of Jenny.

The Cibolero put one hand inside his shirt and tore at the stout paper packet sewn there. He ripped it out. The paper came forth red, and so did his hand. With fumbling fingers he rent aside the paper and opened the delicate little scarf of lace from the Ciudad Mexico. He dropped it over the poor twisted figure, then looked about. The horses were all gone. No matter. He would follow.

Sweat and bloody dust filled his eyes. He wiped them clear, expelled a deep breath, and strode away along the trail. He did not look back at the clearing. Now he had only one thought, remembered but one thing, one man.

AS HE came into the outer trail, he paused for a moment, stepped uncertainly, and put out his hand to a tree for support. Again he wiped his eyes, straightened up, and went on afresh, on out toward the hot sunlight beyond the trees.

Now it must be told of a man who was riding, alone, toward Gonzales with curious work to do there. A big man, carelessly dressed, with a bold, handsome face and very bright hot eyes. He came to an oak tree and saw a man sitting against it, leaning back against the tree, with eyes closed. He dismounted hastily and went to the man.

The Cibolero opened his eyes and looked up, dazedly.

"Here, what's happened?" demanded the stranger. "Looks like you been in a fight."

"Howdy," murmured the Cibolero. The stranger held a flask to his lips, aided him to swallow, then touched his ripped, stained buckskin shirt.

"Good God, man! You're all cut up!"

"Don't matter," said the Cibolero, heartened by the fiery drink. "One of 'em got away. I got to be after him——"

"What? Say, you don't mean a Mex soldier with his jaw 'most cut off? I found him laying dead in the road. Say, who in hell are you?"

The Cibolero suddenly smiled, and relaxed.

"A Texian, by God!" he said, and laughed faintly, although his eyes were blazing. "I tell you, one Texian is good for any ten of them yeller-bellies! Yeah; I'm a Texian, by God, from now on—on——"

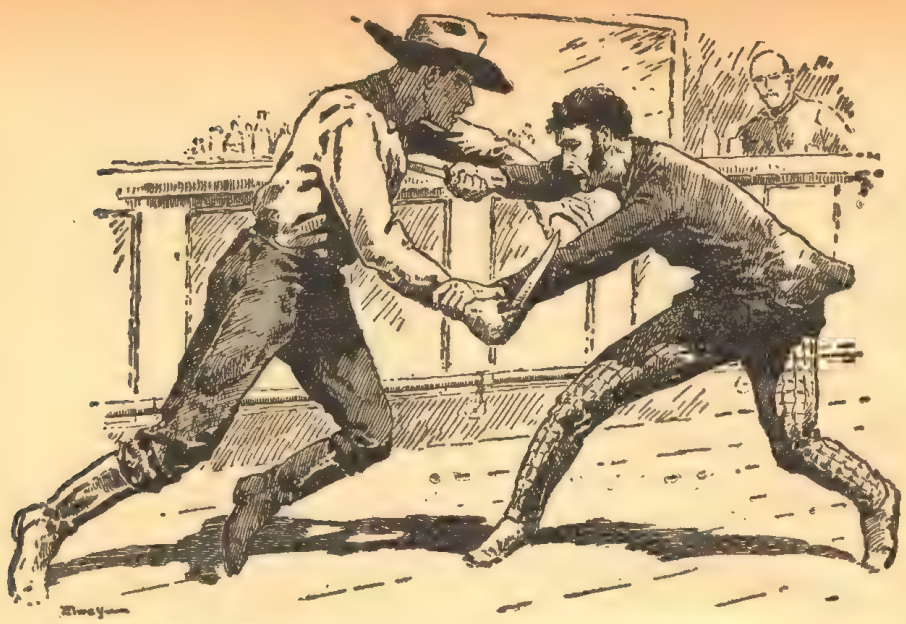
His jaw fell, and his head lolled forward. The other man looked swiftly at his hurts, perceived that life was extinct, then straightened up.

"Texian, huh?" he murmured. "There's the answer to all these politicians. By godfrey, I'll be a Texian myself, and nothing else! Old Sam Houston's right. No more Americans, no more Mexican citizens—just Texians. Yes, sir, sure as my name's Jim Bowie, that's the answer! Shake, pardner. From now on, says you; and that goes double."

And leaning forward, Jim Bowie gravely shook the dead hand of the Cibolero.

(In Next Story Read How Ninety Men Under Bowie Rout Four Hundred of Santa Anna's Soldiers.)

II THE SEVENTH CHILD



I WAS standing beside the wall of the ancient Concepcion Mission, outside San Antonio. Here had been the refectory of the monks, now destroyed on three sides, the walls pock-marked with bullet holes. It was here that James Bowie, most tragic of all the Texan heroes, had fought for freedom in 1835. And as I stood, an echo of voices came to me, then the words of a man singing. I was alone here, yet laughing tones sounded distinctly, until the lilting words reached to me more clearly.

"Yankees and courtly Spaniards, Tennessee mountaineers,
Creoles and Dutch and slavers (gentlemen in arrears)
Shoulder to shoulder gathered, answering blow with blow—
For by God, sir! We fought in Texas a hundred years ago!"

I listened, astonished. A raucous burst of cheering sounded from the air around. Then, amid thin drumming hoofbeats of spurring men, a ragged hearty chorus came to me, a chorus as of distant, shouting men:

"Here's to you, Colonel Bowie, damn your eyes!"

What did it mean? Not even a tourist was in sight; was this some delusion of the senses? And yet, men had died here for liberty a hundred years ago. . . .

THE saloon in San Felipe was well filled, and blue with tobacco smoke. Voices rose in a steady blare of sound. Here in San Felipe men were gathered from all over the Texas settlements in this year of 1835. A new government had been formed, but the convention was riddled with politics, jealousy and diversity of aims.

Alone at the end of the bar stood a man whose hat was pulled far over his eyes. He was drinking, and drinking hard. He had traveled hard to get here, he had spurred hard, day and night; and the man he had come to find was not here.

"Old Houston's plumb locoed!" rose a rough voice down the bar. "We got no call to fight Mexico. All we want is our own state gov'ment back again, ain't it?"

"And be a part of Mexico again? Not much!" shouted another man. "Houston's right. We got to cut loose and have our own republic. We can lick them greasers easy."

"And lose everything doing it, too. Fannin and Bowie and them crazy galoots are fighting along the Border now, raiding Mexican settlements and killing soldiers. Is it true that there's been a fight at Gonzales?"

"Dunno," came the reply. "Some ru-

mors come in, that's all. If fighting's started, boys, hurray for it!"

Argument rose high and impassioned, as confused as the turmoil which prevailed all over Texas. And as it rose, an old Mexican woman came threading her way among the men, a crone whose black eyes glittered from beneath her black shawl. She spoke, now to one man, now to another; she was met with laughter or rebuffs.

The two men next the solitary drinker were engaged in hot argument. Both were from the Brazos settlements, big, powerful men, rough of tongue and of hand. One was discussing Jim Bowie in no uncertain terms.

"Calls hisself a colonel now, does he? Huh! Made his money running slaves. Married into a high-toned Spanish family in Bexar, got a big land grant, and now he's raiding the greasers on the Border. Santy Anny has put a price on his head. Drunken rat, that's what this Bowie is! Fighting grizzly, huh? Well, he's a hell of a man to be a Texian, and I don't care who hears me. Huh? Who in hell are you? I don't savvy your lingo."

The old crone was mumbling something. The other man laughed.

"She wants to tell your fortune, Joe."

"Fortune, hell! She's a spy, that's what." The first speaker flushed darkly, then reached out and gripped the crone by the shoulder. "Sneaking in here to listen. By God, if I had my way I'd hang every greaser in Texas. Come on, you, spit it out; who's paying you to spy on us, huh?"

The crone shrank back, the man gripping her the more fiercely.

The man at the end of the bar moved suddenly. He had hot bright eyes, very blue in color, with reddish brown sidewhiskers. He came up to the three, and took hold of the man's wrist. His movements were surprisingly swift and agile.

"I reckon, suh, you aren't used to womanfolks," he said calmly. His words reached out upon the startled hush. "Apologize to the lady."

"Huh? Me apologize? Leggo my wrist, damn you!" cried out the big man. "Joe Harkness don't apologize to no Mexican slut——"

HIS voice died. The grip of the smaller man tightened on his wrist. His fingers loosened, and the old crone slipped away. A grimace of pain crossed his face, then he swung with his free hand. Instead of hitting the smaller man, he himself was hit across the mouth. He staggered back against the bar, and a knife flashed out in his hand.

"By God, you'll pay for that with your ears!" he roared out, passion flooding in his face. He was oblivious to the swift mutter going around the circle of watchers; he did not catch the name of "Jim Bowie!" that flashed from mouth to mouth. "I'll slit them ears off'n you for that, hear me!"

He hurled himself at the slim figure, but Bowie did not move or evade the rush. Instead, Bowie met him breast to breast, with a ferocity that drew a gasp from those about. The two figures locked. Bowie caught the other's wrist in a steel grip—then suddenly lashed out with terrific speed and savagery.

The fight was over almost as it had started. Harkness staggered away and sank down, groaning. Bowie put away his pearl-handled knife.

"He won't die," he said calmly. "Better get a doctor, to make sure——"

"Jim Bowie!"

The words fairly exploded on the room from all sides, and men crowded in with delighted yells. Drinks were passed. Five minutes later, the magnetic personality of the one man was dominating the whole place, for Jim Bowie had a peculiar charm that held men and gripped them.

They crowded about him in wonder and awe and friendship. Tales of him had gone afar. His prowess as a fighter was already a frontier fable, but he was also a great man, or had been. He had married into one of the proudest families of Mexico, he was wealthy, a golden future had opened out to him; then came the cholera and swept away his wife and children.

And now Jim Bowie was a heartbroken, terrible man who sought only liquor and freedom, for all life was wreckage behind him.

A gust of yells swept down the street. Men came running, bursting into the place.

"Hey! It's true, it's true!" arose the shout. "Fighting at Gonzales, and the boys there whipped the greasers! Licked the best cavalry a-going! Licked 'em!"

"Hear that, Bowie?" screamed somebody.

"I heard it a while back," he rejoined. "I just come from there."

The voices became frenzied, exultant; amid all the uproar, Jim Bowie slipped out unobserved. He passed around to the side of the saloon and stood there in the darkness, trying to decide what to do. He had wanted to find Sam Houston, but Houston was away. As he stood, he could hear the wave upon wave of exultant shouting that spread through town. The finest cavalry of Mexico had been licked by a handful of Texians!

BOWIE grimaced sourly. He had been raiding the Mexicans down on the Border; he and Fannin had formed bands of hot-heads whose sole purpose was to clear Texas of the Mexican yoke. The deputies here in San Felipe did not know whether to fear or admire these raiders.

San Antonio, which the Texians called Bexar, was held by the Mexican General Cos with fifteen hundred men, and President Santa Anna was said to be moving north with a huge army. The half-organized settlers were in chaos. Houston was nominally in command of the army, but had no army. Politics seethed. Rivalries and jealousies were rife. There was no imminent crisis to spur either side to action, unless the battle at Gonzales should set a spark to the powder. Texas was in open revolt, but Cos hesitated to attack, and the settlers sparred for time. Patriotism was, as ever, the cloak of selfish interest.

Bowie heard a step beside him. A hand touched his arm; he recognized the old Mexican woman who had disappeared from the saloon.

"Señor, I owe you thanks, many thanks."

"It is nothing, señora. You had best stay away from such places." Bowie, who spoke her tongue fluently, pressed money into her palm. "Here, this may help you."

"May God requite you! Do you wish me to tell your destiny?"

"I have none." He perceived that he was quite unknown to her. "My destiny lies all in the past."

"There is always death," she said, with a cackle of stark mirth. "Are you curious?"

"No," grunted Bowie. "But if it will humor you, tell me when I shall die."

She took his hand, drew him over to the lighted window in front, and there peered attentively at his palm. Then she looked up into his bright blue eyes.

"Caballero, you are a seventh child."

Bowie started, then laughed. "True true!"

"The past—ah, what a life, what sorrows! *Qué lástima*—what a pity! But I shall tell you the truth, caballero. Death is not far away from you."

"So much the better." Bowie's voice was skeptical and harsh. "By a bullet?"

"No, caballero. I can see you very clearly, dying in bed——"

"In bed?" he broke in scornfully. *"Poder de dios!* Little you know me."

"You are a seventh child; I cannot mistake your future, caballero. You shall die in bed, with the arm of a woman about you——"

As though stung, Bowie jerked away his hand.

"You accursed liar! No woman has any place in my life——"

"By the mother of God, I speak the truth! You may believe me or not, but you shall die in bed——"

Bowie drew back, with a storm of objurgations in angry Spanish. "Devil, fly away with you and your croaking. It's impossible, absurd. Get out!"

HE THRUST her aside and went his way, anger spurring at his brain. The old fool was out of her head. A woman, indeed—die in bed! It was sheer lunacy. He, the most famed duelist and fighter on the frontier, die in bed! He, whose whole heart and soul had died with the woman and two children dead of cholera, have a woman's arms around him! It all angered him past bearing. Yet, how the devil had she known that he was a seventh child?

"Bowie! Hey, Jim, is that you?"

An indistinct figure was approaching him. Under the starlight, he could smell it before he could see it—an indescribable odor of sweat, liquor, horse. A man dusty like himself, whose seamed features suddenly came clear.

"Houston! Why, Sam, of all people! They told me you were out of town. I came here for a confab with you."

"Just got in." The two men struck hands heartily. "Heard you were here and come to run you down. I been ridin' for a week without takin' off my clothes. Come

on to the shack; I got a room in back of a store, yonder. Need a drink powerful bad."

Houston's voice was weary, and his shoulders drooped. Like Bowie, he had the wreckage of life and greatness behind him; but, unlike Bowie, he aimed ever at a fresh career, a newer vision. A hard, rough, patient man, Houston's right arm was a bit stiff from an old shoulder wound that would never heal; his calm poise was fathomless.

The two walked along in silence. Presently they were ensconced in a littered room whose desk was heaped with documents and letters. Houston lit candles, then got out a whiskey jug and drank deeply. Bowie followed suit. With a sigh, Houston sank down on the tumbled blankets of the bed.

"Good to see you, Jim. I been orating all over, trying to raise men, and damned poor luck. Something's got to happen."

"I know it," said Bowie. "When are you folks going to settle on readjustment or liberty?"

"God knows. These damned politicians talk and talk. If I had some men, we'd take action durned quick. Jim, it's a mess," said Houston dejectedly. "They're all holding out to support the Mexican constitution of 1824. Damn it, they can't see the idea of liberty. They don't realize that we must have complete freedom or nothing!"

"Heard about the scrap at Gonzales?"

Houston nodded. "Austin's just gone there to take charge——"

"Then you'd better send somebody after him," Bowie said grimly. "I have three men camped outside town. One of 'em met me here tonight, just come from Bexar. He says General Cos is leaving in a few days with five hundred men for Gonzales to wipe it out."

Houston whistled softly. But Jim Bowie went on without pause.

"You know what that means. We got to carry the fight to him—drive him out of Bexar, drive every Mexican back across the Rio Grande! And I'm starting it. Fannin has thrown his men in with mine. We're riding for Goliad and we'll smash the garrison there, then turn and make for Bexar. Now, old hoss, say your piece!"

HOUSTON came to his feet and began to pace up and down. Fire gleamed in his eyes, his unshaven, grim features took on new life.

"Jim, that's great news! If Cos is attacking, then we can force things. I'll stay here, get the organization moving. Austin will whip up an army and move on Bexar—if you can answer for Goliad! That means everything."

"Upon my honor, Sam," said Bowie gravely. "The Mexicans will be chased out of Goliad if I have to do it by myself. But I shan't. Fannin's waiting for me. In three days, we'll have the town."

"I count on that, then," Houston said curtly. "But remember, Cos has artillery——"

"We have men, by God!" With a laugh, Bowie drank deeply. He knew that Bexar was the key to all Texas. "I'm sending word to Fannin that the army is on the move at last. I'll stop and scout Bexar a bit, and spread news there that the Texians are coming. That'll keep Cos from moving out——"

"Do it if you like, but it'll be known. We've a plague of spies here." Houston swung around, aflame with energy. "You've heard of Colonel Crockett? He's headed this way to throw in with us; I got a letter from him last week. I wish we could get hold of a few regular army officers, Jim! If we had Ben Milam and a few more like him——"

Bowie shook his head. Ben Milam had been a distinguished officer in both the American and Mexican armies. A representative in the Texas legislature at Coahuila, he had been flung into prison when Santa Anna dispersed the state government.

"Well, Sam, we haven't got him, that's all. By the way, how about making Fan-

nin a colonel of volunteers? He's only a cap'n now, and if you folks would give him a rank he'd have more authority."

"Right. You also; I'll have it done tomorrow. What's that paper you've got?"

Bowie grinned and opened the printed broadside he had dug out of his pocket.

"Compliment. A proclamation ordering a bunch of Texians arrested on the charge of treason. Me and Travis and some more ——"

"Why, damn you—hurray!" Houston seized the paper avidly, his eyes blazing. "Just the thing we need, Jim; glory be, now we'll stampede these fellows! I'll send the news on to Austin tonight. How long are you staying in town?"

"About two minutes more. Got to be moving. How soon do you reckon Austin can march?"

"At once, with this news you've brought to stir things up. Jim, you've turned darkness into glory! You can't imagine the jealousy, the squabbles, the petty politics, here! But now it's all different. We'll stampede 'em, and no mistake. I'll guarantee that Austin will march for Bexar inside of five days—if I can send him word that you're attacking Goliad."

"Send him word that Goliad has been captured," said Bowie soberly. "I mean it. You can gamble that much on me."

"Agreed." Houston seized his hand, looked into his eyes. "God bless you, Jim! Take care of yourself; you don't realize how much I'm counting on you in the days to come. We haven't many men like you."

"Damned good thing you haven't," said Bowie with a laugh, and crammed his hat over his eyes. Next moment, he was gone.

AS HE strode along the muddy road, heading for the edge of town where his companions were camped to await him, he became lost in bitter thought. He could not get that old crone out of mind.

Die in bed? Absurd. A woman's arms around him? The idea maddened him. That was the most unlikely of all fates for Jim Bowie—partner of Lafitte the pirate, slave-runner, grandee and landowner, mill-owner, son-in-law of the great Veramendi, and now a broken man and hopeless. It was true, however, that he had been the seventh child. How the devil did that old hag guess it? Or did she have second sight?

His morose meditations were abruptly shattered. Too late, he wakened to dim shadows closing in upon him. A terrific blow on the back of the head crushed his hat and sent him staggering, to fall upon his face in a daze. Only the stout beaver hat saved him from complete oblivion.

He lay motionless, half-stunned, and to all appearance dead.

"Excellent work, my Diego!" sounded a Mexican voice. "It was the blow of a true caballero. We are sure of our money now; dead or alive, said the general. Ha, Mendez! Go you and fetch the other men and the horses, while we tie him hard and fast. Dead or not, he is a devil incarnate and safer if well tied. Hurry!"

There was a soft pad-pad of moccasined feet receding into the obscurity.

"Where is the riata, Diego?" came the voice again. Bowie's head was clearing. His thoughts went swiftly back to that night in Natches-under-the-Hill when, prone upon a saloon floor, he had knifed two men to death. Hard-fighting men. He smiled grimly as he lay.

"Alive or dead, once he reaches San Antonio, the money is ours. You have a good eye, my Diego; you did well to recognize him in that saloon. And it was a lovely blow. Well, take him by the feet; I'll tie up his arms. Wind the riata into the flesh, mind; we must take no chances, for this Bui is a devil. Here, turn him over."

Bowie's figure was rolled over in the mud. Hands seized upon his left arm, but the fingers of his right hand had already closed on the pearl haft of his knife.

The knife drove suddenly upward. There was a choked cry, then a furious and deadly struggle took place in the darkness. One man fell forward, his weight lying across

the legs of Bowie and pinning him down as the second Mexican drove in with knife stabbing viciously.

Somehow, Bowie avoided that frantic, panicky stroke. His left hand caught the assailant and dragged him down, with remorseless grip. What passed in the obscurity was impossible to say. Presently there was a bleating cry, then a slapping of spasmodic feet against the ground, and silence.

THE harsh, mirthless laugh of Jim Bowie sounded. He rose, picked up his crushed hat, and went staggering away. His head was still ringing from that blow; but, if a blow is to change the current of history, there must be no error in its delivery.

Now across the autumn plains of Texas, men spurred fast. Vigilance committees were formed, from near and far the summons brought men with their rifles and powder-horns to gather at Gonzales and elsewhere. Rumors were startling—some said that Goliad had been taken, others said that General Cos was marching on San Felipe. Couriers killed their horses, dust-white men rode shouting past groups of cabins, and from Louisiana parties of frontiersmen were heading fast and hard for Texas. What was actually happening, what would soon happen, no one dared to say.

Upon a chill evening, with a serape flung about his shoulders, Jim Bowie swaggered past the sentinels at the ford, and made his way into Bexar. His glib Spanish tongue, his forged papers, gained him free passage from the ex-convicts in Mexican uniform.

Old Bexar was purely a Mexican city, save for a few American traders. As he strolled about, Bowie was chuckling to himself at the changes in the town he knew so well. Far from marching against the settlers at Gonzales, shrewd General Cos had flung all his energy into preparing against the Texian attack. The stone houses were converted into forts, the streets were barricaded and commanded by batteries of artillery.

Across the river lay the old San Antonio mission, now called the Alamo because a company of soldiers from Alamo de Parras, in old Mexico, had once garrisoned it. It was vastly altered; the outer arches were gone, pulled down to help make a rubble heap, over which artillery could be pulled to the roofs. The barracks windows had been walled up, entrenchments and batteries and outer works had been constructed, and there was not such another fortress in all Texas. No Texian army, without artillery, could take this place.

Bowie was inclined to agree with his Mexican assurance. He turned back into the town and presently came to a halt on the bridge across the upper stream. He stood in moody abstraction, his figure dimly revealed by the starlight, listening to the idle talk of soldiers and women strolling by the stream. Death to the Texian traitors; no quarter; the plunder and loot of land and settlements—he vaguely heard the words, but paid scant attention.

For, there close by, were the lights of the one place he might still call home: the Veramendi mansion with its pleasant gardens. There, as elsewhere, he was welcome. All about in this city were warm sympathizers with the cause of Texas; here were friends, relatives, helpers. Yet he stood alone, staring grimly at the place.

ALONE; he would always be alone now. In that house he had lived and loved and won. Ursula Veramendi, fairest of all Texian women, was his bride. From here he had taken her to Saltillo and built his cotton mills; glittering vistas of wealth, position, influence were open to him. The two children whom he idolized had been born here in this house, had been baptized in the church across the plaza. And then the swift coming of cholera, and everything swept away in a day. Everything except the wealth which he cursed and flung aside.

He pulled his serape closer, staring moodily at the house where he would be so

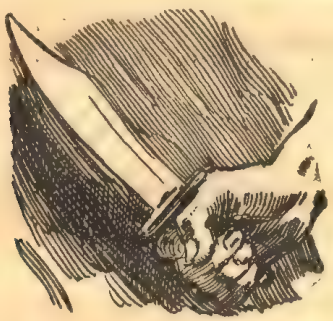
warmly welcomed, did he but make himself known. So he would die in a bed, eh? His harsh laugh sounded softly. He, who had not so much as a bed to his name! Yet the old hag had sworn by the Virgin that she told the truth. Bah! He shrugged and turned away. He was alone, yes, but there remained Texas. Here was something to work for, to fight for, to give himself for; a cause, the only thing left in life. A thing intangible, without self-interest. . . .

"Señor Bui!"

At the soft voice, Bowie turned quickly; his name was pronounced alike in Spanish or English. Close to him in the darkness stood a Mexican soldier, uniform untidy in the starlight, *cigarillo* gleaming with a red point, hat pulled low.

"You speak to me, caballero?" Bowie said quietly, hand on knife.

"But yes," was the response. "I recognize you, señor. You are, no doubt, spy-



ing upon our glorious city, upon our *soldados,* our dispositions——"

Bowie's left arm shot out. He caught the speaker by the tunic and was in the very act of stabbing when he was paralyzed in every nerve.

"Hey! For gosh sake, Jim, hold on! It's me, 'Rastus Smith!"

"Deaf Smith!" Bowie drew a deep breath. Another instant, and he would have killed the most famous scout and spy on the frontier. The two of them stood quite alone.

"Why, you damned fool, trying out your jokes on me! You ought to have a knife in your gizzard; and you came close to it. Where'd you get that uniform?"

"Took it off a greaser; he didn't need it no more. By gosh, you've got a grip! I been follerin' you quite a spell. Thinks I, that ain't Jim Bowie, but it sure is Jim's walk. I'm on my way to locate you at Goliad."

"You look it," snapped Bowie, throwing an affectionate arm about the shoulders of the taller man. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Didn't. Just took a notion to scout Bexar a bit, and seen you. I hear they got Maverick and the other Americans here safe in jail."

"And cannon to hold the place. Anybody send you to find me?"

"Yeah," said Deaf Smith. "Gin'ral Austin allowed I might locate you. Seems like the boys are all het up over Goliad being captured."

Bowie laughed softly. "It will be, day after tomorrow. What's your message?"

"Well, Austin's getting the army on the move. Marching tomorrow."

"Marching?"

"Sure. Heading for Bexar lickety-split; coming like hell, Jim. Austin says for you and Fannin to fetch along your outfits and scout the place, and get a good spot for a camp. He's durned uneasy and wants to be sure you're ready to join up."

"Take back word that we're ready and waiting," said Bowie, a warm vibrancy in his words. "I got to meet Fannin and jump those Mexicans in Goliad."

Deaf Smith chuckled. "You don't need to hurry, Jim."

"Eh?" Bowie stared at him in the starlight. "What do you mean?"

"You'll be too late, I reckon. I met up with a feller on my way here, one of them settlers under Cap'n Collingsworth."

"Yes; he was going to raise men and meet us at Goliad."

"I reckon he's done took Goliad already, Jim. This feller allows that Collingsworth got tired of waiting for you and Fannin to come along and was a-heading for Goliad

nisself. Aimed to git there yesterday and jump the place. He had forty-odd men."

Bowie whistled. "And Colonel Sandoval there has a hundred Mexicans with cannon—good lord! I've got to be off ——"

They moved off, and the obscurity swallowed them up.

IN DEFIANCE of the rainy season, Austin's alleged army was moving forward on Bexar. Sam Houston had sent out a call for five thousand men; five hundred responded. An army without artillery, with little powder, with no discipline. From New Orleans came the Grays, a troop of adventurers burning to liberate Texas, only to find that Texas had no anxiety to be liberated, but wanted to stay in the Mexican federation.

Desperately, vainly, Steve Austin endeavored to beat some cohesion into his rabble. These settlers, hunters, adventurers would acknowledge no authority, and jeered at orders which did not suit them. At the moment, they were aflame with zealous ardor, but not to the point of facing the artillery of General Cos.

Great news reached them. Collingsworth had taken Goliad by assault. Colonel Ben Milam had unexpectedly appeared, having escaped from his Mexican prison. Bowie and Fannin were scouring the plains. With wild cheers, the army pressed on to Salado, five miles from Bexar, and settled in camp. Here Bowie joined them, with Fannin, Milam and ninety men, to be received with great acclaim.

Privately, however, Austin was hopeless and despondent.

"What can we do against Mexican discipline and cannon?" he said to Bowie that night. "And we're far outnumbered."

"What of it? What are you here for?" Bowie snapped.

"To hold Cos in check and gain time. More men are on the march. We have a cannon and ammunition coming sometime. We can't assault Bexar, of course; we'll form a secure camp outside town and wait for reinforcements. Have you selected any camp site?"

"Hell, no. One of the missions might do."

"Then suppose you go ahead tomorrow with your company, choose a secure spot, and we'll move up. Cheer up, Jim; in a week's time we'll have a thousand men gathered!"

Bowie, disgusted, yet realizing the hard sense of Austin's viewpoint, acceded. There was but one gleam of light. Mexican prisoners reported that General Cos, astounded by the assault and capture of Goliad, intended to stay safe behind his defenses.

With morning, Bowie and Fannin moved their ninety men ahead. Bowie had already decided that the Concepcion Mission presented the desired site, as it was on the river and close to Bexar.

EVENING found him camped in and around the outlying mission buildings. He was in morose, surly humor. The prospect of capturing Bexar seemed fantastic, for the boasted army of Texas was no more than a straggling mob of riflemen.

With daybreak, he rose feeling feverish and uncertain. Outside, the camp was rolled in a blanket of dense fog, so thick that nothing could be seen fifty feet away. Bowie went to one of the outposts, and stood talking with the men there. After a little, he knelt and put an ear to the ground.

"Strange!" he said. "I could have sworn that I heard voices and hoof beats. You've seen nothing all night?"

"Nary a thing, Cunnel," was the response. "All quiet."

Rejoining Fannin for breakfast, Bowie had barely risen from table when a man came running and shouting that he had seen Mexican lancers in the trees, at the south end of camp. While a laugh went up at his expense, there came a yell from the northern outpost, then a discharge of

pistols. Instantly, the camp leaped into activity.

"Looks like they're all around us, Jim," said Fannin coolly. "Who'd have thought old Cos would have the nerve to attack!"

Bowie grunted. Before he could reply, the fog was split by a blazing volley of musketry, and as bullets rained upon the camp, the shrill voices of Mexican bugles began to blare unseen.

Volley after volley was poured into the camp from all directions. That they were completely surrounded was now obvious to all; but the men were kept out of sight, and ordered to shelter among the trees and vines below the mission buildings. Until the fog lifted, nothing could be done.

The sun rose, and gradually the fog began to clear. The Mexican fire had ceased; Bowie waited, impatient and anxious. That his force was surrounded and cut off, he quite realized. His head ached, and he knew now that fever had seized upon him.

A shout pealed up, and another. "There they are!"

To the right of the camp, the thinning fog disclosed lines of infantry deploying. Cavalry were wheeling and taking position. A cannon was being brought up and placed in readiness. Fannin uttered a cool laugh.

"Looks like they're out to get us, Jim! How many do you make it?"

"Four hundred, about," Bowie rejoined.

"Thought so. Orders?"

"Take the south side. I'll take the north——"

A rifle cracked. The battle had begun.

Bowie kept his men under cover, restrained their fire, and waited. From the Mexican lines, volley after volley rang out in an almost continuous fire that did little damage, except to the mission buildings. Estimating that the cannon was not more than eighty yards distant, Bowie, picking out his best riflemen, sent them forward to open fire upon it.

"Spread out, boys, and let 'em have it!"

As he spoke, the cannon erupted in smoke. A storm of grape and cannister whined through the brush. Immediately after, the bugles shrilled, and the lines of cavalry wheeled into a charge.

A RIPPLE of rifle-fire broke out from the Texian lines. The men serving the cannon were dropped as though by magic. The cavalry fell into confusion; men and horses rolled in the brush, the charge was broken. A ragged cheer rang out, to be instantly checked as the lines reformed. The artillerymen, although dropping fast under the galling fire, served their piece bravely. Again it spouted death, and again.

The cavalry, spreading out now, came galloping and thundering forward, carbines banging, pennons and lances glittering. Again their ranks fell into disorder, as death smote among them. The gold-laced officers suffered heavily. Bowie, yelling with sheer frenzied delight, saw the charge broken and falling back.

"We've got 'em, boys, we've got 'em!" he shouted. "Get on up closer around that cannon! If they try it again, go for 'em!"

The cannon crashed out. The man next to Bowie coughed and fell against him with a spurt of lifeblood; grape shrieked through the air.

The infantry lines were wavering; most of their officers were down by this time. Their blaze of fire continued, but the bullets went high. Now the bugles were again shrilling, the squadrons of horsemen reformed. From the ground between, where horses kicked and men lay heaped, arose a terrible sound of shrieks and groans, drowned out by the crack of rifles.

The men around the cannon fell fast, yet it was fired again, and yet again, holding the Texian riflemen in check. The cavalry spread out farther, ringing in the whole position, the bugles sounded the charge. This time they meant business.

They swept forward with shrill yells. The rifles began their deadly cracking, front rank firing then falling back to reload

while the second rank fired. Officers went down. The ranks were broken, went sweeping aside in wild disorder.

"Go get 'em!" yelled Bowie, and his men obeyed.

Forth from their covert for the first time broke the Texians. They charged upon the cannon, they went running at the infantry lines, hurled themselves at the broken cavalry. A panicky bugler sounded the retreat.

The lines broke and fled. The cannon was abandoned. The lancers and dragoons headed about in precipitate flight for Bexar's protection. The ninety had smashed the four hundred, captured their positions and their cannon.

Fannin and Bowie slapped each other on the back, dancing about in boyish exultation. Men shouted until they were hoarse, ran down horses and captured them, brought in the wounded, looted the dead.

"Jim, after this we can do anything!" exclaimed Fannin eagerly. "If we had the army here, we could keep 'em on the run and take Bexar!"

"Sure, but there's no army," said Bowie drily. His face was hot and flushed, his eyes very bright. Fannin surveyed him with a frown.

"Looks to me like you got fever, Jim."

"I know it. No matter. Come on, we got plenty to do!"

Plenty to do, yes—couriers to send out, wounded to take care of, dead to bury. Bowie settled down to write his report. The words came hard.

"I reckon I need a drink," he murmured, and got it. Then he looked down at a ragged wound in his coat—a bullet had torn through, not touching him. He broke into his harsh, mirthless laugh.

"I always heard a seventh child was born lucky," he observed. "Reckon it's so, too. And maybe that old hag knew her business. By godfrey, I may have to die in bed yet, just to prove that she did! I'm sure going to be ill. And if I am——"

His eyes warmed suddenly. Old Ben Milam, of course! There was the man to take over the company from him, if he was ill. Ben Milam!

Elwell

III THE JAILBIRD

UPON a gray December dawn, I crossed one of the river-bridges in San Antonio and came to a halt beside an ugly modern store-front. Here had stood the old Veramendi mansion with its gardens—gone now. The street lights glimmered fitfully. A thread of mist rose from the river.

Somewhere a voice lifted. Some homeward-bound drunk, I thought; but no! It was a gay voice, ringing and vibrant and clear, a voice to stir the blood. The words actually echoed from the store-front nearby, and reached me distinctly. The lilt of song came clear:

"We didn't have much book-learning, we knew the feel of dirt,
Some of us had fine manners and some of us lacked a shirt;
We could shoot or swing a broadaxe, handle a pick or hoe—
And by God, sir! We fought for Texas, a hundred years ago!"

Thin and far, a burst of raucous laughter and wild cheering seemed to float from the moonstruck clouds overhead. Voices broke forth in unison:

"Here's to you, Old Ben Milam, damn your eyes!"

No one. Nothing in sight; the street was empty. Imagination? Yet on this very spot, a hundred years ago almost to a day, a man had died. That old Veramendi mansion had witnessed strange scenes, a corpse laid to rest at low twelve with Masonic ritual while bullets shrieked around. . . .

TWO men paused at the entry to a trench running across the street, running across to the Veramendi gardens.

Rifles were cracking, musketry was ringing out in continuous uproar, cannon were smashing away at every moment. Down the street, over the barricade of the trench, bullets were hailing. Dirt was flying. Discharges of grape went screaming in ricochet from the stones, threw earth and splinters everywhere.

"Down, Ben! Down!" exclaimed one of the two men. "Stoop as you go across!"

"Be damned if I will," and the other man laughed gaily—a deep, vibrant laugh. "I'll stoop for no Mexican! Those fellows can't shoot, anyhow. Come on!"

He started across. What thoughts were in his mind, what retrospect of life past, of

glorious adventure, came to Old Ben Milam in this moment? He was barely forty-five as he strode along, head high, a gay smile on his lips.

HIS thoughts went back to Monterey. There, the previous fall, he broke jail. Alone, empty-handed with a stolen horse, he set out to cross seven hundred miles of savage trackless desert. He was being hunted near and far.

Weeks later, starving, haggard, worn to the bone, he prowled about the wretched collection of adobe huts by the Rio Grande which was named Laredo. He was waiting his chance to steal a chicken or anything else eatable, and get along. Voices reached him as he crouched in the brush.

"Keep an eye out, Manuel. The orders are to keep a sharp watch for that mad Americano who escaped from Monterey. El Coronel Milam."

"Colonel Milam?" echoed another voice in surprise. "But I know him well. He is no Americano; he is of Mexico, señor! I have served in his regiment. He is one of the legislature from the state of Texas ——"

"No matter. He's a rebel, to be shot on sight."

Milam grinned to himself as he listened.

ALL his life had been a record of wild adventure. In the War of 1812 he distinguished himself. A Kentuckian of little education, he had something better—ability to win men's affection, to make them follow him.

He plunged into filibustering, joined Lafitte the pirate, came to Mexico as an adventurer. Since then he had been, as they said, in every Mexican jail. He helped Mexico win independence. When Iturbide seized power as emperor, Milam held out for freedom—and went to prison. He escaped, went on fighting; was given a million acres of land and became affluent. He went down to Coahuila as a member of the legislature from Texas.

Then Santa Anna struck, overthrowing the Mexican constitution and proclaiming himself dictator. Ben Milam, like other Americans caught in the net, went into jail; but jails did not hold him long. He got out, got a horse—and here he was.

Such was the man who crouched there, biding his time.

Presently the time came. He darted in upon the empty hut, made away with a little corn and a fowl, and with darkness to aid him, regained his skeleton horse. That night he swam the Rio Grande.

More desert ahead, empty Texan plains, and he had to keep far from roads, pushing on by star and sun, living on berries and nuts and grass and cactus-pears. No safety for him until he reached the American settlements to the north of Bexar.

Weeks later, his horse a staggering ruin, he himself was at the last gasp and worn to a shadow. His clothes were rags. Shaggy beard and hair uncut, he looked like nothing human. And then, one afternoon, he looked down the blinding sunset lane of light, and saw three horsemen making for him. He was caught.

Ben Milam had no intention of going back to jail, however. Desperate, he sent his poor beast toward a clump of trees, gained the cover, and slid to earth. Where he was, he had not the least idea. A good hundred miles from safety, at least; he had covered six hundred or so, by his figures. He whipped out his knife, got his back against a tree, and blinked at the three riders who came spurring in at him.

"Hey, Bill!" broke out one of the three, in astonishment at close view of this gaunt scarecrow. "He don't look like no Mexican!"

A gasp broke from Milam. Then a cry.

"Hey! Are you fellers Americans?"

"You're durned right we are," came the response. "Took you to be a Mexican. Who are you?"

Milam dropped his knife and reeled forward.

"Ben Milam. For God's sake give me a bite to eat——"

MILAM! With whoops of joy, the three surrounded him. They shared their clothes with him, plied him with food and water. Suddenly, at their words, he jerked up his head and stared.

"What's that? Looking for Mexicans? What d'you mean?"

"Ain't many left loose," and one man grinned. "Didn't you hear about the fight up to Gonzales?"

"Fight?" Ben Milam's eyes flashed. "Good Lord! You don't mean Texas is fighting? And me in jail down there! Is it true?"

"You bet. We got forty-odd men down the river with Cap Collingsworth. We're aiming to jump Goliad tonight. Jim Bowie's got another crowd a-coming but we sort o' lost ourselves."

"Hurray! Count me in!" cried Milam eagerly. "All I want is to get a good whack at those Mexicans! And you've actually had fighting?"

"Sure thing. We've done kicked the Mexicans out of Anahuac and all the other places down to the Gulf, except Goliad and Bexar. And there's an army coming to kick 'em out o' Bexar likewise. We got one hell of an army, lemme tell you——"

Texas was up and fighting, then! On the moment, Ben Milam was like a new man, alive with fire and energy. None the less, that horrible march north had grayed his hair and beard. He was Old Man Milam now, to everyone.

But he was safe at last; and that night, in the camp down the river, his arrival electrified Captain Collingsworth's little band of settlers. He had been given up for dead; but now the name of Milam was a thing to conjure with. His gay, eager spirit, his fiery energy, had made him one of the most popular men in Texas.

Despite his military training, his rank in the Mexican army, he refused bluntly to be elected as an officer. He insisted on joining up as a volunteer private. Texas in revolt! The dream of his life had come true.

The gray light of dawn; and before them lay the town of Goliad, with its stores, its arms, its ammunition. Here was the only fortified place in Texas, outside Bexar itself, with a hundred men in garrison.

The forty-eight men crept forward in the obscurity. A sentinel challenged them, yelled in alarm, fired. Rifle-bullets cut him down. Men armed with axes smashed at the gates. The quarters of the commandant were stormed.

In ten minutes Goliad was taken, its garrison were prisoners or fugitives, and Old Ben Milam had struck his first blow for Texas.

NOW from east and north a storm of men concentrated upon San Antonio, then known to one and all as Bexar. The so-called army of Texas marched from Gonzales; men came from the Border villages, from the Gulf coast, outlaws and men proscribed. Adventurers from Mississippi and Louisiana, in full company and gay uniform. They came gaily on, convinced that one Texian could put to flight a hundred Mexicans, cocksure in the belief that General Cos would surrender abjectly at the first summons. They recked nothing of his fifteen hundred regulars, his score of cannon and his ample fortifications.

All of them knew Ben Milam or had heard of him. He attached himself to Jim Bowie and the impetuous Fannin—hard-fighting, hard-living Jim Bowie, who had a force of guerrilla riders. They came pouring down to Bexar, men without discipline, order or artillery, burning to be at Mexican throats, fighting among themselves—eager to fight for the status of Texas as part of the Mexican federation. Few of them talked of liberty, of cutting the state from the union. They knew not whom they obeyed, were careless of authority, laughed at orders.

Suddenly came the fight at Concepcion Mission, outside the town, when Bowie and Fannin, with ninety men, whipped the four hundred. There came the "grass fight," when Mexican foraging parties were driven madly in upon their fortifications by Bowie and Ben Milam. These encounters gave the enemy abrupt pause.

These Americanos were not men but devils. To fight them openly were utter folly. And the fortifications, the artillery, the unexpected odds against them, gave most of the Texians even more abrupt pause.

Who held Bexar, held Texas—and General Cos meant to hold Bexar. He said as much, with his calm, disdainful smile, when he was summoned to hand over the town. Mexico would not treat with rebels, except at the point of the bayonet. There was a price on the head of their leaders; let them disperse! All American traders inside Bexar were clapped into jail. Over the Alamo was hoisted the scarlet flag—no quarter to rebels!

Rebels? Jim Bowie, Milam and a third of the army hooted at the word. The other two-thirds, including the leaders, thought twice. Actual rebellion meant loss of lands, position, estate. Many in the army were Mexicans who had joined the Texan cause, but not to cut loose from Mexico. Indecision arose, for here faint hearts held the reins. Steve Austin departed to raise more

men and money, and General Burleson took over the army.

Deaf Smith, the scout, got news in plenty out of the town, and no happy news, either. Even Ben Milam, who was all for a headlong smash, paused and blinked when he heard about it.

HALF a mile outside town, the army encamped and pondered sadly. Weeks passed, nothing was done; General Burleson took command, and he was a cautious gentleman. Old Ben Milam raged and ranted and drank, and nothing was done. General Cos was afraid to come out, and Burleson was afraid to go in—and well he might be. The settlers began to drift away, back to their farms and families. Food and ammunition were low. Within the ranks, dissension, quarrels, sectional differences, arose.

Most of the army wanted nothing more than to keep Texas in the Mexican federation. A few wild, bold spirits, like Sam Houston, Bowie and Ben Milam, were for independence.

And there lay Bexar, with General Cos laughing up his sleeve and waiting for them to come into his trap. A strong trap. The houses were nearly all of solid stone, and had been converted into loopholed forts. The streets were entrenched and barricaded.

Artillery commanded every approach. The old mission outside town, known as the Alamo, had been converted into a stout fort, armed with cannon on roof and wall, with outer breastworks and batteries ready. Every street, every entry, each of the two plazas, could be swept with bullets. To attack, without artillery preparation, would be slaughter.

So said General Burleson. So said all cautious spirits. Colonel Ben Milam fumed, and plenty of others with him. Ill feeling grew and became violent. November had passed. The bleak winter season was at hand, and nothing done, nothing attempted. Came the fourth of December.

Old Ben Milam and a riotous, unruly throng were gathered in the officers' quarters. A Mexican deserter had come in with word that there was disaffection among the Mexican troops, that the defenses were not so strong after all. As Milam and the others once again canvassed the situation, the bombshell broke. One of the New Orleans Grays came running in.

"All over, boys!" he panted. "Orders just been given out from headquarters. We're marching tonight."

"What?" yelled Milam in delight. "Attack?"

"Hell, no," was the disgusted response. "March begins at seven o'clock. The siege is done with. We're going into winter quarters down by Goliad."

There was one blank moment of incredulity. Then followed a storm of oaths. Milam was the first man outside and heading on a run for Burleson's headquarters.

True? The news was only too true. The orders were posted. The Texan "army" was to march away at seven that night.

"Like hell it will!" said Milam, white with shame and rage. "I came here to fight, not to sit on my heels all winter. By the Eternal, I'm going into Bexar if no body else goes!" He lifted his voice. Like a bugle-note, that blaring shout of his lifted over the tumult and quelled it, with words that were to ring down in history.

"Who'll go into Bexar with Old Ben Milam?"

THERE was a frenzied chorus of yells. A Border hunter yelled out something about "bear" and "Bexar"—both words being alike on American tongues. Word was flashed through the camp. More men came on the run. The crowd grew by leaps and bounds, literally.

"Old Ben Milam's going into Bexar, boys! Come on!"

General Burleson appeared, furious. He attempted to quell the tumult, to enforce discipline, commanding Milam and the others to disperse and give up their mad purpose. He was hooted down, jeered

down; discipline, so far as he was concerned, was at an end.

Of the eight hundred men in camp there, three hundred and one threw in their lot with insanity. On the spot, Milam was elected to command the attack. He ordered the volunteers to disperse, and meet him at seven that night by the old mill on the river.

There, with torches flaring, Milam gave his orders. The three hundred were to attack at dawn—he himself by Acequia Street, Colonel Johnson with the second column by Soledad Street, the two avenues leading into the heart of the town. A deputation waited on the general, requesting him to postpone his runaway march until the result of the insanity was known; which, as one chronicler says, Burleson "very cheerfully" agreed to do. He even agreed to send some of his five hundred regulars to make a feigned attack on the Alamo, on the other side of town, while Milam attacked. And this was all he did do.

Daylight approached. The feigned attack on the Alamo began, completely holding the attention of the garrison—and as soon as Milam's rifles were heard, the "regulars" calmly marched back to Burleson's camp, leaving Milam to his fate.

These two streets were completely commanded by fortifications and batteries. Milam, with Deaf Smith scouting in the van, led his column straight ahead. A sentry fired, and Deaf Smith's bullet killed him. Five minutes later, Johnson's column was in control of the Veramendi mansion and gardens, while Milam and his men occupied the De la Garza house. These two houses were opposite each other, but there was no communication between them; each of the two converging streets entered the main plaza a hundred yards away. That hundred yards was composed of fortified houses, breastworks, batteries.

A tremendous fire was opened upon the two positions. All day long, grape and musketry poured forth, while Milam and Johnson consolidated their gains and dug in. With night, they fell to work opening a trench communication between the two houses, and by dawn, accomplished this. Throughout the night, the cannon never ceased to thunder.

Morning of the 6th found Milam's force in desperate position. Despite the trench, communication was risky, for it was under constant fire. Mexican sharpshooters had spread out on all sides, along the river and on housetops, and the cannon of the Alamo maintained a galling fire of grape. Milam's men, however, had brought up a small cannon, and opened a return fire with this. His riflemen began to work out, and pick off the enemy.

"Nothing for it but to go ahead," said he. "Let's go!"

WITH the 7th, Milam was more stubborn than ever. One house, surrounded by an open space, lay between him and the buildings on the plaza. He ordered every man out with a rifle, and this tremendous and deadly fire swept the Mexican trenches clear, silenced the batteries temporarily, and cleared the sharpshooters from the housetops. In the lull, one Henry Karnes, an enthusiastic adherent of Old Ben Milam, grabbed a crowbar and ran for the house across the open. Muskets rained bullets, but he made the house in safety, and by the time a flood of men had followed him, smashed a way in. The house was captured. Milam was almost to the plaza now—but Johnson was still blocked from any advance.

Maverick, a trader who took an active part in the assault, attempted that afternoon to map out some course of action with Ben Milam. They inspected the newly captured house, which drove like a wedge at the buildings around the plaza.

"Can't get there by the streets," said Milam, as a hurtling storm of grape whistled overhead from the battery fifty yards away. "But we might smash into one of those houses and get a footing on the plaza itself."

"The men are staggering on their feet,

Ben," said Maverick. "So are we. No sleep, mighty little grub, no rest. The church roof, the house roofs, are crowded with men ready to open fire on any advance. And their artillery—whew! Listen to it!"

As afternoon waned, indeed, the cannon from the Alamo had gradually opened up a regular and sustained fire, so well-directed that any communication, even by the trench, was hazardous in the extreme. Milam cursed the squatting camp outside town.

"Five hundred fresh men out there, and nary a one of them lending a hand!" he said. "Well, I'll skip over to the Veramendi house, see Johnson, and arrange with him to make a joint attack at midnight."

"Don't do that," said Maverick in alarm. "Man, it'd be madness! At least, send word over. I'll take the message."

"Send anybody where I wouldn't go myself?" snorted Milam. "Not by a damned sight. I'm going over."

"Then I'll go along," the other rejoined. "Watch out, though. They've got sharpshooters in the trees along the river. Spreading out everywhere."

The two made their way back to where the communicating trenches began. At the gay smile, the hearty words of Milam, the weary, wounded, haggard men, resting and fighting by shifts, raised a feeble cheer. Milam conferred with his officers.

"We're going to rush 'em, boys," he said. "If we can drive 'em out of the Navarro house, we'll get into Zambrano Row through the walls—and we'll have a wedge driven in that'll split the log sure! Well, Sam, let's go."

THEY stepped down into the trench and made their way along. They came to the street, with the Veramendi house opposite. Musket-balls spattered the dirt, grape shrieked and whistled. Milam started across, laughing.

"Down, Ben, down!" cried Maverick. "Stoop as you go across——"

"Be damned if I will!" returned Milam. "I'll stoop for no Mexican. Those fellows can't shoot, anyhow. Come on—it's safe enough."

A group of men were waiting at the end of the trench. Milam waved his hand to them. Across the street now, and stepping out of the trench——

Milam staggered. Then he collapsed, and Sam Maverick caught him as he fell. The rifle-crack came from a cypress tree along the river.

He was shot through the brain.

They could not believe it for a moment. They looked down at him, stared one at another, as the dismayed word was passed along. Old Ben Milam—dead!

Darkness descended. The red flashes, the thunders of cannon, never ceased. Colonel Johnson called his officers and those of Milam together. Grim men, powder-smeared, unshaven, in no better case than the men they commanded. A brief colloquy, then Johnson was elected to the supreme command.

"All right, boys," he said. "Cannon or no cannon—let's go get that Navarro house right now. Make 'em pay for Ben Milam."

"Make 'em pay for Ben Milam!" The phrase flashed on, was caught up and repeated. Weariness was forgotten. If the Alamo flew the red flag of "no quarter"—then the Mexicans would get no quarter. "Make 'em pay for Ben Milam!"

They went rushing forth. They swooped down on the Navarro house, hammered a way in, fought from room to room. Even from the roof, the Mexicans resisted, firing down through holes cut—until they were cleared from here, also. The house was taken at last. Adjoining it was Zambrano Row, a long barrackslike series of rooms. Men fell savagely to work, attacking the walls between with pick and axe. A long job.

Midnight saw Ben Milam laid to rest, with balls whistling around, with grape hurtling through the trees; laid to rest while heads were bared in the darkness,

lest lights give away the party, and while the words of the Masonic ritual were punctured by the blasts of cannon. And those who did not hold with Masonry, saluted Ben Milam in the fraternity of patriotism and a cause common to all. There were tears on bronzed haggard cheeks, and choked voices. Ben Milam was gone, but his memory would not be stilled.

The word went on. "Make 'em pay for Ben Milam, boys!"

Hour after hour. Rain damped the powder; the morning broke cold. Into the Navarro house came the Grays, fresh and vigorous. The breach went forward in the walls; at last they were through, pouring into Zambrano Row under a hail of bullets.

Through—and now it was hand to hand, savage, a struggle of ferocity on both sides, no quarter asked or given. Bowie knife met bayonet, rifle met musket. As each room was cleared, the thick partition walls had to be breached into the next.

IN THE midst of this, a ragged cheer went up. Exhausted, grimly fighting on with faces like corpses for want of sleep, men looked one at another. The ragged cheer echoed again. Laughter took it up, hysterical laughter. Reinforcements at last —a lieutenant and a few men from Burleson's camp. But others were coming. Shame had done its work at last. News of Ben Milam's death had put fire to the powder-train.

They came, indeed, with evening—men trooping along, fresh and eager, hurling themselves into the struggle, giving the exhausted volunteers a chance to drop and rest. But the Grays refused to yield the van to these late-comers. Zambrano Row was cleared now, and the wedge driven home that would split the log.

Before midnight, the Grays struck. A strong walled house that would command the main plaza, lay directly ahead; it was heavily occupied. The Grays struck it like a thunderbolt, breached the wall, poured in a withering fire, reached the house beyond and stormed it. Then they began to cut loopholes.

Cannon and musketry opened up. Hour after hour, until daylight, the Mexican batteries sent balls and grape smashing in. Daylight came, and the rifles began to answer back with deadly effect. The plaza was under their fire. Reinforcements streamed up; more rifles went into play. Johnson and his men were gathering for the assault on the houses beyond, when suddenly the cannon fire slackened, and halted. The din of musketry died out. There was a silence in the sunrise.

A white flag came into sight, borne by a number of officers coming from the Alamo. General Cos and his fifteen hundred had had enough.

Then, indeed, General Burleson and his staff marched into Bexar, captured by no fault or deed of his; and the spirit of Ben Milam must have roared with ironic laughter to hear the stately phrases of surrender dictated by the "regulars," while those who had followed Old Ben into Bexar licked their wounds and mourned their dead.

Five days later, all were gone. Cos and his Mexicans, dragoons and foot—a third of them chose to remain as Texians—marched out and away toward the Rio Grande. The last Mexican was gone from the soil of Texas. Burleson was gone, too, with his "regulars" and his staff. The army was gone, dispersed again to the settlements.

Colonel Johnson remained to hold the town he had won. And one other remained, deathless in death, the silver cord loosed and the golden bowl broken; he, the homeless, gone to his long home where he bides today under a slab of stone, a great rough ashlar like himself, that bears but the one word

MILAM

IV—THE RIFLEMAN

VERY late one night, I was standing by the bullet-scarred entrance to the old chapel of the Alamo, in darkness and silence. Around hummed and throbbed the citied life of San Antonio, ablaze with neon lights and loud with sound; but here was silence, where a hundred years ago Mexican soldiers had come charging to death. Upon this silence broke a voice, singing. Some radio, I thought. Yet the voice seemed to echo from the very stones beside me; presently the words came more clearly and distinctly—

"We gambled and chawed terbaccer, we did as we had a mind,
We'd fight for a horn of liquor, and we left our wives behind;
We scalped and we cussed and ranted, we could wrassle heel and toe—
And by God, sir! We wrassled for Texas a hundred years ago!"

Then there was a rush of voices together. This time from inside the dark closed chapel. I heard a trampling of feet, a storm of rough, hoarse accents in chorus:

"Here's to you, Davy Crockett, damn your eyes!"

Was it mere fancy? Impossible to say. Here had died men, rough, hearty, lusty men of a past century, who had wrangled, disobeyed orders, hesitated, and finally fought to the death. Very human men, no prating, smug heroes—

WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY had come with great celebration in San Antonio. The prolonged fandango had left headaches in its wake. On this morning after, really early afternoon, Colonel Davy Crockett of Tennessee was enjoying a horn of liquor in the back room of Colorado Smith's store.

Crockett was rough and hearty of speech and action. His shrewd gaze surveyed the red-headed Smith, and a quizzical expression lay in his bronzed, square-hewn features.

"Prime liquor, Red. Dog-gone, that sure was one wild night! I come to Texas looking for a scrap, and all I see is fandangoes. Pretty soon, me and Jim Bowie are going down into Mexico and lift some scalps, you bet. Say, is that there state convention up at San Felipe going to declare for independence or not?"

"Nobody knows what that bunch of politicians will do," said Smith disgustedly.

"Sam Houston's the only real man in the whole crowd. He's for independence, but most of 'em want to stay in Mexico as a state. Any news at the fort from Santa Anna's army?"

Crockett tasted the liquor, rolled it judicially on his tongue, and shook his head.

"Nope. Ain't no army, far's we can tell; looks like that's all hogwash. All hands wrangling and cussing at headquarters. Colonel Travis, he's got a new gray uniform and a commission, and allows he's the prime egg; and Jim Bowie allows he's in command. And both being Texas cunnels, and me only a Tennessee cunnel, I ain't claiming no command at all. The Mexicans have been chucked out o' Texas and now we got time to fight among ourselves. Well, suh, here's to your hopes!"

He drank solemnly, his twinkling eye belying his words. Smith, who was one of the two or three American merchants in Bexar—what is now San Antonio—followed suit. After the riotous celebration of last night they felt a drink necessary.

"I dunno, Davy," said Smith, reflectively. "There's plenty of Mexicans who are the salt o' the earth. There's plenty, like Captain Seguin, fighting with us Texians. But this here Santa Anna—well,

he's plain bad. An opium fiend. When he does come, I'll gamble he raises hell."

Davy Crockett guffawed. "Say! I've heard that song and dance for months. When I got here, what happened? Ben Milam and three hundred men had kicked out Gin'ral Cos, his fifteen hundred, and all his cannon—booted his backside clear over the Border. I'm real disap'inted, Red. I ain't seen a scalp lifted yet."

"You will," said Smith ominously, and Crockett guffawed again.

Half a mile from town and across the river was the old Alamo chapel, fortified in case of need by Travis and his garrison of a hundred and fifty Texians. Like many another, Crockett had come as a volunteer to aid the cause of Texas— but at the moment this cause was in some doubt.

After sharp fighting, every Mexican soldier had been expelled from Texas. At San Felipe, a convention of settlers was now in session. Whether to secede from Mexico and declare Texas a republic, or come to terms with Santa Anna and remain as a state in the Mexican federation, was the burning issue. Santa Anna and his armies had started north long ago to crush the rebels of Texas, but where he was, nobody knew.

THE convention had named Sam Houston commander in chief of the Texian forces—but Houston had enemies. Few of the leaders would obey his orders, and the convention had deposed him again. Everything was in absolute chaos, in this February of 1836.

"I've heard that Houston ordered Colonel Travis to abandon Bexar," Smith said slowly. "You're a military man, Davy. What do you think of the situation?"

Crockett chuckled. "I'm like the feller put up a tree by a b'ar," he said. "My thoughts ain't suitable to utterance. We got a hundred and fifty men here in Bexar. Colonel Fannin is over to Goliad with three hundred men. Near as I can see, that's the whole dummed Texian army."

"Sure. But what about Houston's orders?"

"I reckon that's right. He tells Fannin to abandon Goliad and fall back on the Guadalupe River—and Fannin thumbs his nose. He tells Travis to blow up the Alamo and abandon Bexar—and Travis thumbs his nose. Them boys ain't running from no yeller belly Mexican general, and allows as much. And now who's in command? Nobody knows, and every feller is baiting a hook to catch the fish."

"Well, I don't like it," said Smith anxiously. "We drove out the Mexicans last year——"

"And that's just the trouble," broke in Crockett shrewdly. "You-all drove 'em out and allowed Mexico was licked. Then the dummed politicians got busy, and instead of being a republic like Sam Houston wanted from the first, what is it? Look at the flag acrost the river. We're fighting for Mexico, durn it!"

True. Over the Alamo floated the striped flag of republican Mexico with the date of 1824, when its constitution was adopted. Santa Anna, proclaiming himself dictator, had abolished that constitution. Texas alone resisted his dictatorship; and now, in its lack of all discipline and cohesion, Texas was about to suffer his wrath. Goliad and the Alamo were the only points which could pretend to fortification.

Shrill voices suddenly rang out from the street and the store front. Smith went to see what was up. Colonel Crockett, who understood no Spanish, leisurely poured himself another drink; when it came to hunting or drinking, speechifying or fighting, he was ever in the forefront.

SUDDENLY Smith came rushing into the back room, blazing with excitement.

"Good God! The Mexicans are here, Davy—the dragoons are coming from San Pedro Hill this minute! Santa Anna's almost in the town itself. Run for it, man! We're caught!"

As though to emphasize his wild cry, the heavy report of an alarm-cannon boomed forth, and a tumult of voices eddied up after it.

By the time they reached the street the whole town was in uproar and confusion. The Mexican dragoons were, indeed, among the outlying farms. Due to the rival factions of Bowie and Travis, the garrison had sent out no scouts, and was totally unaware of Santa Anna's rapid advance. The surprise was complete.

The town itself was defenseless, with so small a body of garrison. The Alamo was the one rallying point. Crockett found himself running with the rest, through the streets to the river and across to the fortress. Mexicans, women, Americans—all poured in wild panic past him. Shopkeepers abandoned their stores and ran for it. Captain Dickinson, with his wife and child, dashed along on horseback, better late than never.

No quarter! Santa Anna had sworn it, and the thought was in all minds.

The buildings of the Alamo were ample. About the little chapel centered breastworks, batteries, enclosures for cattle; to the right stretched two-story barracks, with batteries defending them. The whole covered about two acres.

Once he reached this point, Crockett paused, aghast. True, most of the garrison were now retiring to the fort in good order, but the lack of all preparation was painfully evident. Upon reaching the walls, they fell into wild disorder. Everyone gave orders, no one obeyed them. Men who had sold muskets and rifles for liquor, were yelling for weapons. Others were rushing about or trying to load the cannon, of whose use they knew nothing. Women and children were being hurried into the chapel.

Crockett threaded his way through the tumult to the south battery, where his equipment had been left. There he found Captain Ward, an Irishman, whom he had drunk under the table the preceding night. With a score of men, Ward had his guns loaded and was calmly awaiting orders. Crockett got rifle and powder horn, and grinned at Ward.

"Howdy, Cap'n! By gum, if you ain't sober! First time I've seen you so."

"True for you, Colonel," and the other chuckled. "Devil and all, I ran out of whiskey just at the proper time, eh? Hello! There's Bowie."

ORDER began to come out of the chaos. Bowie, who disputed the command with Travis, took a detachment and began to scour the nearer houses of the town in search of food. Another squad was rounding up cattle and driving them into one of the enclosures. Travis, red-headed, feverish, resolute, began whipping the men into shape and seeing to the guns.

The afternoon wore on. Into Bexar were pouring dragoons and engineers and infantry of Santa Anna. Apparently an endless stream of them. A burst of music from regimental bands and volleys of cheering tokened the arrival of El Presidente himself. As evening approached, dragoons came galloping close. Travis ordered Captain Ward to fire his eighteen-pounder at the enemy. The cannon crashed out.

Later, a number of horsemen rode toward the fort, bugle blowing and a white flag raised. Travis, who was in the battery with Crockett, shook his head at those around.

"Ignore it, ignore it!" he exclaimed hotly. "If they want to parley, let 'em come to the gate and be admitted—what the devil!"

From the side entrance, where Bowie commanded the barracks and batteries off to the right, a party of men were leaving the fort with a white flag. Travis cursed, then fell silent. He was in command of the troops of the alleged Texas government. Bowie was the idol of the volunteers. One had been placed in command of Bexar by the Convention, which was anti-Houston, and the other had been unanimously elected by the garrison. For the

past two weeks, both factions had been engaged in a heated quarrel over authority.

When the white flag returned, the message from the Mexicans was simple. Surrender at discretion as rebels—which meant execution. Already, no quarter had been proclaimed. The red flag blowing at the tower of San Fernando church, in the town, announced it. The alternative was to fight—or run.

EVENING. In the great open courtyard in front of the chapel and behind the main batteries, Crockett looked on with his shrewd, patient eyes as the garrison assembled. Among the volunteers were Captain Seguin and other Mexicans. There were Negro slaves. There were women. Bowie was surrounded by his wild fighters; Travis by his more disciplined men. The two leaders conferred and shook hands. Bowie, a dark flush in his features, a feverish glitter in his bright blue eyes, waved an arm.

"All right, boys!" he lifted his voice. "Travis is in command. Take his orders!"

A wild joyous yell pealed up. The common peril had ended all dissension. Travis was an accomplished, even dramatic, speaker, and harangued the garrison briefly. The Mexican troops and batteries had spread out, but on the east side were none. The garrison could get away. A man was taking out dispatches. All could leave if they so desired.

"We've plenty of powder," he concluded. "Fannin has three hundred men at Goliad, and can join us. The government can get an army here if we give 'em time. Fight or run?"

He was answered by a tumultuous roar. Fight!

"By thunder," lifted the whimsical voice of Davy Crockett, "I sure hope Santy Anny comes a-piling in! If somebody will grease him, I'll guarantee to swaller him, head, horns and all."

There was a rollicking burst of laughter.

Next morning the news spread that Jim Bowie was down with some kind of fever. The Mexican townfolk who sought refuge here, had sneaked home during the night. Ten of their women remained in the chapel, and one of these, Andrea Candelaria, took her place as nurse for Bowie, who was moved into an upper room of the barracks.

The cannon had begun to thunder.

Nine batteries in all were planted, and now Davy Crockett began to enjoy himself. The Mexicans attempted no assault, but Crockett led out parties of skirmishers by day and night. An uninterrupted rain of shell, ball and bombs was maintained upon the devoted group of buildings; not a man inside was killed, but a huge breach was laid open at the northeast angle, the roofs were riddled, the walls smashed in.

Better than the cannon that made reply, were the rifles. Crockett was deadly at this work, bringing down man after man about the Mexican pieces. The besieged were by this time jesting at the cannon which killed nobody, but Colonel Travis knew better. His messengers went forth to Fannin, to Houston, to the Convention, for aid. Jim Bowie lay upon the bed from which he would never rise, being delirious with pneumonia and nursed constantly by the faithful Andrea Candelaria. He would meet death in a woman's arms—as had been foretold him ere this.

THE 29th of February. That night Captain Seguin, with his Mexican orderly, rode through the fire of the dragoons, in a desperate attempt to bring Fannin to the rescue. Next night, thirty-two men from Gonzales rode in, with Colorado Smith guiding them. Smith turned around and departed two nights later, taking the last word from Travis.

"I have held this place ten days . . . and I shall continue to hold it till I get relief from my countrymen, or I will perish in the attempt."

No bombast there; the old dramatic Travis was stilled. Perhaps the calm, shrewd genius of Crockett helped him write those words. The men from Gonzales had

told the worst—Houston was desperately trying to rally men and could not. Another Mexican column was holding Fannin in check. One hundred and eighty-three men now, within the walls, and thousands around them under the blood-red flag that still drooped from the high church tower. There was no doubt of the issue.

"I reckon," drawled Crockett, "that as long as we can enjoy a dram o' liquor and keep plugging away at them 'tarnal Mexicans yonder, we're safe enough behind these walls. Safer, anyhow, than if we tried to skedaddle!"

Bonham came in next night, too—chivalrous Bonham, with definite news that there was no relief, and no hope. Day and night, the cannon were smashing away. Bonham rode in through the enemy, knowing he came to a certain ending here. Crockett struck hands with him quickly, harshly, gladly; and together Tennessee and South Carolina enjoyed a horn of liquor to the safe arrival.

Two tentative attacks, mere feelers toward assault, had been repulsed.

On the night of the fifth, Crockett heard the word that Bowie was dying. He went to the upper room and sat there for a time to relieve the nurse. Bowie was conscious, but weak. Not too weak to lift his brass pistols, however. He had Davy Crockett load them and leave them on his cot, and fell asleep again.

A damp, misty night. In the cattle enclosure where the men bivouacked in shelter from the cannon balls, Crockett came down in time to help barbecue some meat and get his share of it. They had counted thirty corpses that day, lying out around the main Mexican battery, and Crockett came in for hearty congratulations.

A MIXED lot, these shadowy figures crowded about the fires. Irish, Scotch, French, English, German, Dane, Mexican; cobblers, army men, adventurers, settlers, Indian fighters, store clerks, gentlemen. Crockett's droll stories set them all to laughing, and after a time he departed to his cot in the officers' quarters, between the chapel and the barracks. In the room overhead lay Bowie.

"How's Betsy behaving?" demanded Bonham jocularly, coming in to retire. Crockett glanced at his rifle and grunted.

"Oh, me and Betsy are still friends, I reckon. I'm itching to get me a shot at one o' them gold-laced officers, suh."

"Maybe you will yet," and Bonham laughed as he drew off his boots. "By the way, Travis wants you to relieve him at midnight, in charge of the guard. He'll wake you."

"Fine and dandy," said Crockett, with a nod. "Then I'll snooze off. 'Night!"

He turned his back to the light and was asleep almost at once.

Midnight. An occasional cannon sent its load tearing into the buildings. Travis, when Crockett joined him, peered out anxiously at the lights of the batteries and the town, and shook his head.

"Keep a sharp eye, Colonel. A good many lights have been bobbing around out there. They may try to make another night assault, though I doubt it."

"You bet I'll keep awake," and Crockett chuckled. "Ain't anxious to get my scalp lifted, not by a good deal! Sleep tight."

Only trained frontier senses could make anything of a damp, murky night like this. The river-mist reeked up and hid the stars, though not thickly enough to cast any fog around the buildings. From the parapet, Crockett listened, took a dram now and then to keep out the cold, chatted with the sentries. The hours drew on. The voices of women praying came at times from the former chapel, and the voices of wounded men.

To the left of this chapel and its barricaded courtyard in front, rose the barracks. Out in front of all these, across the open space, lay the main breastworks, the cannon. There at the northeast corner was the breach, wide open to assault. This breach, however, was commanded by the artillery to either side.

Dawn lifted and stirred. A man wakened Travis, shaking him.

"Look alive, Cunnel! Cunnel Crockett allows you'd better step out."

A WORD to Bonham, and Travis was gone, buckling on his tunic. He found Crockett in the dawn-darkness.

"What's up?"

"Troops a-moving, I reckon," drawled the man from Tennessee. "If I was you, I'd rouse all hands——"

A crash came from the nearest Mexican battery, re-echoed from the barracks roof as the ball tore through, showering stone and plaster about. Ward's voice broke from the darkness. The red roar of his gun made instant response. Gun for gun.

"Look alive, boys!" Travis started the word. "Every man to his post."

Crockett sauntered away to the battery in front of the chapel, exchanged a jest with Ward, shared a last dram with him. Then to work loading Betsy.

Movement out there, no mistake about it; the movement of companies and regiments tramping along. From the walls came the *tamp-tamp* of ramrods tapped down, as rifles and muskets were loaded. Low voices rose from about the cannon. Crockett waited, immobile, leaning on his rifle, coonskin cap shoved back on his head.

Tension grew and grew, so that men fell silent, staring into the darkness. They could feel it now, could sense the gathering forces, the coming of the moment.

"Think they're coming, Cunnel?" one of the men exclaimed.

"I reckon," said Crockett calmly. "Give 'em hell, boys, when they do!"

Murmurs, reassuring, stout-hearted, made response. The darkness was thinning out now. Things began to take shape in the grayness. Then, sudden as death, a clear silvery bugle lifted a quick double-step note. Cheers made answer—a wild chorus of voices out in the grayness.

"Viva Mexico! Viva El Presidente!"

"Let 'em have it!" shouted Travis.

Things were moving—masses of things. Rifles barked here and there. The cannon began to roar. The cheers changed to yells, to screams. Crockett waited. Three columns—one of them here, coming straight at the walls. A storm of musketry burst forth on all sides; bullets sang and whistled, chipped the stones, brought men down to death.

Crockett lifted his long rifle. He saw now the thing he had waited this long while, the gaudy figure surrounded by aides. Santa Anna himself? Perhaps; his finger pressed the trigger. Not Santa Anna, but another.

SUDDEN, upon the roar and banging and shouting, grew a great burst of music from the Mexican battery by the bridge, five hundred yards away. All Santa Anna's massed bands were there, and into the dawn the brazen throats trumpeted out the *degüello*—the "no quarter" music, played for generations at bullfights when the bull was about to die. Now it was no bull dying.

As though in response, the cannon along the walls belched smoke and grape into the masses below. The dawn was clearing fast; men could see to shoot. Crockett was firing as rapidly as he could load, picking off the officers. The column below was halted, smashed, repulsed. It broke up and flooded out around the walls—no more cannon now. The Mexicans were under the walls, too close to reach.

"Smashed 'em, by God!" yelled somebody, exultantly.

But from the north came shouts that fetched Crockett around, aghast. Travis dead! Yells burst out on all sides. The Mexicans were pouring in at the breach, flooding into the courtyard; they had taken the outer barricade and the guns. Bayonets out, muskets spitting——

"Back, everybody!" yelled Crockett.

Full daylight coming rapidly. The Mexican columns were everywhere, over the outer walls; the defenders fell back to the buildings. Crockett gained the twelve-

cannonade on the west wall, and found men loading it.

"Let 'em have it!" he ordered, helping them swing it around. Below, the Mexicans were filling the whole courtyard. The carronade belched and roared, the stones shook. A terrible scream rose from those massed victims below.

"Keep it up, boys!" panted Crockett, and caught up his rifle.

They began to load and ram, while a hail of bullets flitted around them. Others came up and joined them. The range of barracks was turned into a hell. The cursing Texians, broken and shattered, filled the rooms, were on the walls—rifles sending death into the Mexican ranks filling the courtyard. Again the carronade roared forth, and again shrieks arose at its voice.

CROCKETT saw a gun being wheeled from the outer work. He dropped the officer in command; another took his place. The gun was loaded and discharged. Its ball smashed into the first room of the barracks, burst down the doors. Hard upon it flooded Mexicans, a solid mass of them pouring in upon the barracks room. Shots, the glint of knives, wild yells and a swirling of men for a little space; then the bayonets were red. Again the cannon smashed forth at the next room—no communication here.

Crockett was turned half-around, staggered, caught himself. Half the men were dead, here around the carronade. As he rammed home the charge in his rifle, blood was running from his sleeve. The carronade belched once more, and once more shrieks welled up from the mass of troops below—but this was the last time. Balls hailed around. The Mexicans were up on the roofs now, clearing them, bayonets flashing. The men around the carronade wilted and drooped and died.

With a leap, Crockett was gone. His eagle eye perceived that everything was lost; the last stand would come by the chapel. As he left the roof, he saw Dickinson, with his child in his arms, leap from the east wall for the irrigation ditch below—leap, and be mowed down by a storm of musketry. He and the child both.

Then Crockett was gone from the wall, gone to the old chapel. His rifle spoke there for a little while, as rapidly as might be.

In the upper room of the officers' quarters, the savage swart faces blocked in at the door and halted. Bowie lay there in bed, his blue eyes glittering, his pistols lifting; they fired, as Andrea Candelaria shrieked in horror. She shrieked at her own people, these Mexicans. She flung herself forward, caught the head of Bowie in her arms, tried to shield him with her own body. A musket roared. The bullet drew blood from her chin, passed on into Bowie's heart.

Men surged in. They tore her away, tore the dead thing from the cot, lifted it on their bayonets and so passed it out and hurled it into the courtyard below. The cannon was crashing again. A room crowded with wounded men; a blast of grape tore through doors and walls and flesh, and when the soldiers burst in there were few to feel the bayonet.

CLEARED, now. A few men on the chapel roof, others in the chapel. From the battery by the bridge, Santa Anna and his staff advanced. The men on the roof fired right willingly, and balls whistled, so that El Presidente scampered back in all haste. And, above everything, the shrill music of the *degüello* pealed unto heaven, its reiterant refrain maddening the blood.

Crockett fired methodically, mechanically, carefully, dropping only officers. Men he knew well were sprawled in death, or writhing in agony. Closer now, all of them, swarthy Mexicans, alert graceful officers—he killed them very neatly. The fighting was drawing near him. He retreated into a corner of the embrasures, and a few men with him. The old doors of the former chapel were shut and barred. Across the courtyard, he saw Ward's gun being

wheeled around and loaded. Not by Ward; the happy Irishman lay across the parapet.

Five or six Mexicans clumped together —Mexicans of the garrison, fighting with all the ferocity of the Texians, knife aflash and defiance on their lips. Never a whine for mercy. An officer and a score of soldiers came at them with the bayonet. Crockett grimaced and dropped the officer in his tracks. The bayonets plunged and plunged again, and the little clump was gone, still stabbing for a space, then sprawled in death.

Bullets buzzing like bees all around. Crockett dashed blood out of his eyes. His? No time to think about that. Five or six men around him now, rifles reloading, faces grim, eyes staring death in the face. Then a cannon-blast—Ward's cannon, full at the chapel doors. They splintered under the hurtling iron, splintered and crashed and gaped. A howling flood of soldiery went at them, burst them in.

Screams from the chapel. The women were not hurt. Crockett had one wild glimpse of Major Evans, lighted match in hand, rushing for the powder magazine. Then Evans was down, hit. He struggled to one knee. Half a dozen bayonets darted into him all at once, and the magazine was not fired.

A white thing out there in the courtyard, lifted on the bayonets of blood-mad soldiers. A white thing, mangled and ripped. That had been Jim Bowie.

"By God, give 'em hell!" yelled Crockett in a sudden spasm of unleashed ferocity. The little knot of men around him echoed the yell. The rifles barked out—the last shot. Stark berserk rage fell upon them all, gripped them up in a whirlwind. Half-a-dozen wounded men were dragged out of the old chapel and butchered on the stones.

"See you in hell, Davy—here they come!" rang a shout.

A sudden rushing wave of them, swart, sweating faces, white teeth, staring eyes, bayonets a-glitter—a wave that crested upward over the heaps of corpses and broke. The long rifles fell and smashed. The iron barrels fell and fell again. The wave was shattered, it fell back in wild fear and terror of these flailing demons. Five left on their feet.

Knives out now. Bowie knives, hunting knives, as the ring of bayonets hurtled in over the corpses. Five of them in a corner of the wall. Two or three up on the roof, shooting straight down into the heads of the Mexicans. Bullets swept the roof and they were silent. Five left here in the swirling tide of uniforms, breaking them, stabbing in dread silence, stabbing against the long bayonets. Breaking them again, by the Lord! Breaking them, until the Mexicans yelled in sudden panic that these were devils, not men, and drew back.

Three on their feet now, hands and arms red, knives red, silent. The bayonets drew back and back. An officer cracked out orders. Crockett stooped, caught the barrel of his rifle, and with one swing sent it at the squad—a last gesture of flying iron that struck down a man.

The muskets crashed. Inside the ring of corpses, only corpses were left.

Music swirled higher and higher. Yells and cheers rang out. *"El Presidente! Viva! Viva Santa Anna!"*

HE CAME, slender, gold-laced, erect, his glittering staff around him; came now, when bullets flew no more. Short, sharp orders. Among the heaps of death, wounded men were brought forth, and the bayonets became red again, stabbing them anew. All of them, without mercy. No quarter to these rebels!

A sudden burst of shouts, of wild yells. A swirl of men staggering out all in a knot, then disintegrating. Half-a-dozen Texians found in a room somewhere. An officer saluted El Presidente, asked for their lives.

"You have your orders. Obey them."

The muskets crashed again, for the last volley.

The women were brought out. El

Presidente bowed to them gracefully, saluted them, shrugged at sight of the two negroes—body servants of Bowie and Travis. Andrea Canderalia, with blood on her chin, drew his curious glance for an instant. But it was diverted by excited yells, a streaming hurry of soldiers—a handful of the rebels found somewhere. The yells died out in hysteric laughter as the red beyonets drove down.

More wounded. A few men outside, who had jumped from the walls. They were hunted down with shout and jeer. Now a search was begun for any other survivors.

The sun was just rising. It was thirty-two minutes from the time the first signal bugle had sounded the assault.

El Presidente sent for his negro cook, Ben, who knew most of the Texian leaders by sight. With his aide, Almonte, he had Ben move about among the dead, displaying the corpses and picking out those of the leaders. Terrified, shaking, the frightened negro identified Travis, then the mangled body of Bowie. Then in the southwest corner he pointed to a bullet-riddled thing in blood-smeared fringed leather garments.

El Presidente looked, and turned away with a shrug.

"El Coronel Crockett?" he repeated. "There must be some mistake. I never heard of him. He is not of Texas, eh? Come, Almonte; it's time for breakfast. The breakfast of victory!"

"Another such victory," said Almonte in a low voice, "and we are ruined."

THE sun rose higher, the full day sprang into life. The dead were sorted out and laid aside; the Mexican dead, for burial. The wounded were carried to hastily constructed shelters along the river—the Mexican wounded.

As the day wore on, a few more survivors turned up—some men hiding in a loft, a man who had gained an irrigation ditch and shelter of a bridge there. The volleys rang out once again; the bodies were pitched into the courtyard with the rest. The place was looted of arms and aught else that could be worth while.

Wood was gathered from near and far. Wood from field and forest, wood from the shattered barracks, beams from the breached defenses, old black oak from the organ-loft in the former chapel. Three great piles grew up, piles of bodies and of wood intermingled.

Santa Anna came again to the scene of his conquest and watched the work go forward. Here was the last gesture of contempt, of insult toward rebels. He examined the wounds of these dead men with curious interest. Two soldiers lifted a white mangled thing that El Presidente recognized. He checked the men.

"Wait," he said irresolutely. "Wait. Señor Bowie—he was too brave a man to be burned like a dog. He should have burial."

He caught the curious stares of his staff. What! A moment of weakness in the conqueror? Santa Anna read the looks aright, and irritation seized upon him. He turned away with a shrug.

"Well, never mind; throw him in."

The three piles grew and grew until all was done and the torch applied. Three columns of smoke blended and lifted into the sky. They swung in the eddying breeze and then were caught and carried toward the Mexican camp, with a splutter of sparks and a rain of fiery particles.

And the Mexicans, some of them, looked up with terrified eyes and crossed themselves. An omen, they muttered; an evil omen.

They were right. While these men died and were burned, the Convention had at last declared for independence. The die was cast. Texas was no longer a part of Mexico.

Elwell

$TEERS

By BENNETT FOSTER

Author of
"The Law Comes East,"
"Temper," etc.

JERICO JONES liked the looks of the kid in the corral. He liked the business-like way the young fellow set about saddling the blindfolded pony that was tied to the snubbing post, and he liked the way the kid went on with his work and paid no attention to spectators. The kid was a hand.

Sitting the gray horse, Stranger, that he had bought in Vado, one booted foot cocked over the horn of his saddle, Jerico prepared to enjoy himself. There was going to be a show and Jerico had a reserved seat.

With the saddle on and cinched down tight, the youngster stepped back a pace and surveyed his handiwork. Apparently finding it good, he loosened the pony from the snubbing post, caught a stirrup and went up into the saddle. There he collected the long end of the loose rope he had knotted to the hackamore, tucked one end in his belt, took a good hold with his left hand and, leaning forward, slipped the blindfold from the trembling horse.

The pony stood stock still for a moment, collecting himself, and then went straight up in the air. The boy rode easy. He didn't spur like a contest rider, nor did he pull off his battered Stetson and fan the horse. He sat the saddle, anticipating his mount's movements by the fractional second that marks the rider, and anticipating them, shifted his weight adroitly. The chunky bay horse was a bucker. Jerico leaned forward in his own saddle to watch the show.

The kid was riding clean, and so engrossed was Jerico that he failed to note the advent of another rider beside the corral. Jerico was riding that bucking horse with the kid and sweating just about as much as the kid was. The bay spun, sunfished along the side of the corral, hit the ground with all four feet and sucked back under the saddle and the kid stayed there. Jerico, brought to his senses by the odor of burning hair, plucked the cigarette from his lips and threw it away. For perhaps the four-thousandth time he had singed the close cropped brown mustache that shaded his lips. He swore petulantly at the mustache and turning his head saw the other rider.

Jerico nodded a greeting and with lifted reins moved Stranger over toward the newcomer. He was filled with admiration for the job going on in the corral and he wanted to share his enthusiasm with someone else.

"Makin' quite a ride of it, ain't he?" said Jerico when Stranger stopped.

The man he addressed merely grunted and Jerico spared a glance from the exhibition in the corral. He didn't particularly like what he saw. The man was swarthy. His full lips were petulant, pouting a little. His black eyes were hard as he looked at Jerico, and his clothing was entirely too good. Jerico dressed pretty well himself,

but his taste ran more to boots and hats. Give Jerico Jones a pair of forty-dollar shop made boots and a fifty dollar Stetson and he didn't care particularly what was between them. Jerico took his eyes from the black haired man and watched the show.

THE chunky bay horse was pretty well bucked out. The kid tried a tentative spur and renewed activities for a moment, but it was evident that the bay was through. A few more jumps and the horse quit, standing with heaving sides and head down. The kid waited as a gentleman should, to see if there was anything more his opponent had to do. The bay was quiet and the kid climbed down and fell with adroit, adept movements to removing the saddle.

The black haired man beside Jerico spoke for the first time.

"When I want my horses rode I'll tell you, Macklin!"

Macklin, the kid in the corral, pulled his saddle from the bay. He dropped it in the dust, pulled off the hackamore, and turned.

"He ain't yore horse," said the kid levelly.

"He's my horse an' this is my place," snapped the black eyed man. "You got yore notice to vacate yesterday."

"An' tore it up," answered the boy. He lifted the heavy saddle and carrying it, came to the corral fence. Depositing the saddle atop the fence, he climbed up and over to stand to Jerico's right. Jerico reined Stranger back out of line. Evidently he had butted into something here in Rock Ribs valley.

"You'll get off this place." The black eyed man seemed very certain of his ground. "It was mortgaged to me an' I'm goin' to take it over. Yo're dispossessed."

"He don't seem to know it," said Jerico dryly.

"Keep out of this!" snarled the black eyed man, glancing at Jerico.

Jerico's blue eyes were mildly amused.

"This is my place!" Macklin, the youngster on the ground, spoke harshly. "I own it. The mortgage ain't for enough to cover it all. Sturgis, you maybe can pull that on some but you can't on me. Now get out!"

The black haired man backed his horse a step or two. For a moment Jerico thought that he was going to take the order. There was a look on the man's face that Jerico didn't like. There was something coming. Sturgis had a hand hidden by the skirts of his coat. There was a gun in that hand, Jerico was sure. Macklin, the kid, didn't have a gun. A man doesn't ride buckers with a hogleg on his hip. Jerico's own right hand stole up

Jerico Jones Sits in to a Little Game of Range Warfare on the Long L Front

and caressed his mustache. Six inches down from that brown adornment, under his coat was a spring clip holster and a forty-five with a four and a half inch barrel. Several men had mistaken mustache stroking for a gesture of indecision.

"No sir!" said Jerico softly, and yet there was command in his voice. "The kid ain't got no gun on him!"

Neither Macklin on the ground nor Sturgis in his saddle looked at Jerico. Apparently they were waiting for something. Sturgis spoke, his voice as soft as Jerico's.

"Get off my land!" said Sturgis, and added a name that will bring a fight wherever English is spoken. Macklin's face went red. He lunged forward, reached with angry hands for the man on the horse. As he moved Sturgis brought a gun from under his coat, and from the corner of the log barn close by the corral, a rifle blasted. Macklin's lunge became a fall. He pitched down, full length, rolled convulsively, and for a moment Jerico had a picture of an awful face, the eyes wide and staring and the forehead gone where a soft nose slug had torn its way through bone and brain.

In the next instant Stranger leaped under the thrust of spurs. It was not a moment too soon, that leap. The rifle slammed again from the corner of the shed and lead smacked viciously through the air.

JERICO'S own gun was out. Atop the plunging Stranger Jerico threw two slugs toward the barn. From his left a Colt roared and Stranger ceased his plunging and leveled off in a run. Sturgis was shooting, Jerico knew. He pulled back on his reins to check the running Stranger and the left rein snapped. There was blood on Stranger's neck. The leather dangled uselessly in Jerico's left hand. He twisted in the saddle and threw two shots back at Sturgis beside the corral. He had the satisfaction of seeing Sturgis throw himself out of the saddle, then the rifleman beside the barn resumed practice and Jerico flattened himself out and devoted his attention to getting the most out of his horse. Eight years in the Rangers had taught Jerico the fallacy of going up against a man with a rifle, particularly when that individual is hidden and is a good shot. Stranger went over a rise of ground with his belly almost touching the ridge, covered an intervening draw with a leap and took to the other hillside. Jerico pulled hard on the rein left him, swung his weight to the right, and the running horse curved down from the hillside and went down the draw. There was no use in trying to stop Stranger. Jerico straightened in the saddle, swung his body with the wild run of the horse, and fell to jacking out used shells from the forty-five. His face was white beneath its tan, and his brown mustache stood out dark against the whiteness. He had just seen cold blooded, premeditated murder committed and he hadn't been able to do a thing about it!

The gray horse, Stranger, had ideas of his own about being stopped. A bullet crease along his neck had cemented those

ideas in his mind and Jerico was some distance away from the little cluster of ranch buildings where he had witnessed tragedy, before he brought the gray down to sanity again. When he did gain control he stopped the horse and dismounted. Then, taking a length of his rope for a rein, he repaired the damage wrought his bridle as best he could, soothed the trembling horse, and mounting again rode on at a hand's pace. Jerico knew that there was no use in returning to the scene of the shooting. He would either run into hot lead or, and this was more probable, find the killers gone. He carried a distinct picture in his mind of the dark faced

Sturgis. The actual killer he had not seen.

There was a town, Niroba, somewhere to the south of him. The gray had run south and Jerico judged that he was within ten or fifteen miles of the place. The proper thing for him to do, he felt, was to ride into Niroba and report the killing he had witnessed, to the authorities. Still, Jerico was a canny sort of individual. In his thirty odd years he had seen a moil or strife and trouble and he was not in the habit of going off half cocked. Before he did any reporting, he told himself grimly, he would do a little scouting around. The name Sturgis seemed to find some responsive spot in his memory. Somewhere he had heard that name but he could not exactly make a connection. So, grim faced, Jerico rode on, and the gray Stranger, placid once more, set a steady running walk that ate the distance.

STRIKING a road that ran south Jerico swung into the ruts. He followed the road, passing a cluster of buildings over to his left where lights were already beginning to glow. Quite a pretentious ranch the size and number of buildings indicated. Probably a place where a wandering rider might find bed and board. Still Jerico rode on and within five miles his efforts were rewarded. The sun had dropped behind the Rock Ribs and dusk was heavy in Rock Rib valley when crowning a low rise Jerico saw, scattered before him the lights of Niroba. Stranger checked the running walk and Jerico let go a long breath. This was town.

He watered Stranger at the trough in front of the blacksmith's shop near the edge of town, and riding easy, let the gray horse travel down the street. There was a graze on Stranger's neck and a rope bridle rein to back Jerico's story and that was all. Reflecting on these facts, he did not immediately seek a livery stable and rest for the horse, but rather well toward the middle of Niroba's single dusty street, he stopped and tying the horse to a deserted hitch rail before an unlit store building, proceeded afoot. Caution and circumspection had served Jerico well before this. A man who rides the lone trails, be he outlaw or officer, learns to progress carefully until boldness is demanded. In front of a well lighted building the sign of which informed the uninitiated that it was "The Stag Saloon," Jerico stopped. He beat dust from his clothing with his gray Stetson, settled the shoulder rigging of his gun, and with his coat shrugged down in place, walked through the swinging doors. Instantly light and sound beat upon him.

The Stag was populous. From the rear of the room came the musical clink of glasses, the fainter, softer flutter of cards being shuffled and poker chips touching each other. Smoke from cigarettes, pipes and cigars curled up toward the two big lamps that hung from the ceiling and shone against the bracket lamps on the walls. The thump of booted feet came, and over all these sounds was the steady diapason of voices, drawling, soft spoken voices. This was a cow town. Jerico felt weight drop from his shoulders. In a hundred towns in ten states he had been greeted by just such sounds. This was home.

As he walked toward the bar and a waiting bartender, Jerico became aware of a group of men clustered loosely under the nearest of the lights. Range men these were with the twang of Texas in their voices when they spoke. They were not doing much talking, Jerico noted. In the center of the group was a tall giant of a man, white haired, hook nosed, keen blue eyes showing beneath bushy white eyebrows, sweeping mustachios above his thin lips. Jerico knew the man. He was Old Man Larey of the Long L north of Marfa. Idly Jerico wondered what Larey was doing so far from home. No one knew how many acres the Long L controlled or how many cows wore the brand. Surely there was enough and more to keep the Old Man busy back in Texas. Shortly, Jerico told himself, he would walk over and speak to Larey. They had sided each other some years before in a minor bicker-

ing near the border and Jerico knew that Larey would be glad to see him.

Jerico gave the bartender his order for whisky and when the glass and bottle were shoved out, poured a modest drink. He wanted information rather than whisky. The bartender might give it.

"Pretty good business?" suggested Jerico.

The bar man nodded. "Always good," he answered. "Niroba's a good town."

"You got quite a territory," said Jerico putting down his glass. "Many ranches?"

The bartender shrugged. "Not so many as there was," he said. "We got one big one though an' that's plenty. The fall work's about done an' there's lots of Bar S men in."

"Bar S?" questioned Jerico.

"Sturgis' outfit," said the barman. "Have one on the house?"

JERICO poured his drink and slid a dollar out on the bar. There was a little fire creeping up in his mind. Sturgis! That was where he had heard the name. In Vado, where he had left the railroad in his quest, they had told him that there was not much use going south, that Sturgis owned the country. Men had been passing and repassing behind Jerico's broad back as he talked. Now the bartender nodded and Jerico half turned. He saw a broad faced, sandy complexioned man return the bartender's greeting. There was a star on the vest of the broad faced man.

"Deputy Sheriff," said the bartender as Jerico turned back. "Lance Touhy."

"Good man?" suggested Jerico mildly. He would have business with the sheriff's office shortly.

"Plenty good," said the bartender. "Used to be a Bar S wagon boss. He spends most of his time around here. There was a killin' north of town today an' I reckon Lance is lookin' into it."

"A killin'?" Jerico appeared to be slightly interested.

"Fella named Macklin," said the bartender. "Sturgis an' Webb Greves brought him in. Sturgis seen the fella that shot him."

"Well," said Jerico thoughtfully.

"'Nuther?" questioned the bartender, eyeing the bottle.

"One more," agreed Jerico. "Where's a good place to eat?"

The bartender's eyebrows lifted. "Tired of eatin' at the yards with yore bunch?" he asked.

Jerico saw that he had made a mistake. He hastened to rectify it. "I'm plenty tired of burned grub," he growled.

From his left, toward the clustered group of Texans, came a voice that caused Jerico to put down his partially filled glass. He had heard that voice, heard it during the afternoon. It was a hoarse, rasping voice, and without turning Jerico identified the owner. The speaker was Sturgis.

"That's the proposition. Take it or leave it!" snapped Sturgis.

Quiet seemed to settle in the Stag's long room following that announcement. Jerico turned slowly keeping his glass in his right hand. The movement brought his hand across his coat, nearer the forty-five that lurked in the shoulder harness.

"Sturgis, yo're a dirty crook!" That was Old Man Larey's deep voice. Jerico eyeing the Old Man saw that his mustache was bristling, a sure sign of impending trouble. "You bargained for them steers last spring an' you know it."

"Have you got a scratch of paper to prove that, Larey?" Sturgis was apparently as angry as Larey. "You come bargin' into the yards with a thousand head of Chihuahuas an' expect me to take 'em off yore hands. I won't do it. Not at the price you ask."

This was interesting. Jerico leaned forward a little to get a glimpse of Sturgis' face. He saw it, the same swarthy, full lipped, black eyed features that he had seen at the corral. Behind Sturgis was another man, almost an albino. As Jerico peered he caught a glimpse of a pair of washed

out blue eyes as the man behind Sturgis looked up.

"I'll give you fifteen thousand dollars," rasped Sturgis. "Not a cent more. You can take it or leave it, Larey."

"Hell, they stand me twenty thousand the way it is," growled Old Man Larey.

"I can't help that," Sturgis lifted his hand and Jerico could see a slip of pink paper in it. "Here's the check."

There was a soft murmur among the punchers near Larey. These were Long L hands, Jerico surmised. They were taking their temper from the boss.

"To hell with you!" Larey snapped the words. "Damn you, Sturgis, you crooked me an' you know it. You an' that white eyed skunk behind you think you own the earth an' got a fence around it. You——"

THE man behind Sturgis stepped away from the bar. Between Jerico and the tall Larey, men pushed themselves away. These were local men. Apparently they had an idea that something was coming. Jerico had seen that movement before, that ripple of men along a bar front. Usually it presaged a shooting. He stood calm, his left foot on the bar rail, his right hand holding his glass.

"You talkin' about me, Larey?" snarled the light eyed man.

Jerico, watching narrowly wondered why it was that men like the speaker never became accustomed to the climate. They were always burned and never tanned. The speaker was sunburned and his nose was peeling and red.

From Larey's left a fresh voice came, a smooth, flowing voice with a touch of the South in it. "He was talkin' to you, Greves," said the voice. "Any remarks?"

Jerico looked at the speaker. He was young. Very young. His face looked as though it had never felt a razor. Smooth the boy was, smooth sloping shoulders, smoothly muscled body, smooth hair where it showed under his pushed back hat. The hands were long and brown and smooth and the boy's eyes were hazel with little golden flecks that caught the light from the ceiling lamps. A heavy gun, butt swung a little forward, hung in a carved leather holster that seemed to hug the boy's thigh. Sure he was young and smooth and, Jerico judged, just about as forked a proposition as ever straddled a horse. The light eyed man, Greves, would do well to take a backward step.

"Shut up, Pat!" snapped Old Man Larey angrily. "I'm old enough to look out for myse'f. Sure I was talkin' to you, Greves. To you an' Sturgis. I'll talk some more. I'll make you a proposition, Sturgis. I'll write you a check for a million dollars even. I'll give it to you for the Bar S, lock, stock, an' barr'l. I aim to start me a steer ranch up here. What'd you say?"

Sturgis' face darkened with a sudden surge of blood. "I say you're crazy!" he snarled. "You couldn't write a check for a million dollars. You——"

"Try me an' find out," flared Larey. "If you won't take me up then pick up yore two bits an' go home. Fifteen thousand dollars!"

Sturgis' fingers ripped the slip of paper he held. The pieces of the check dropped in a little pink shower. "You'll start a steer ranch!" he snarled. *"You'll——"* His eyes met Jerico's and he stopped short. The breath he had taken came out in a long gasp.

"Lance!" he yelled. "Come here, Lance! There's the man that killed Macklin!"

There was confusion as the deputy sheriff pushed forward. Men moved swiftly out of the way, pushing back toward the wall. Jerico waited, tense. This was pretty, very pretty, he thought. For an instant he took his eyes from Sturgis' face and glanced at Old Man Larey. Old Man Larey's eyes met his. Old Man Larey's eyebrows went up a little in surprise. Old Man Larey's voice boomed.

"Where?" demanded Old Man Larey.

"Him!" Sturgis' pointing finger was rigid.

OLD MAN LAREY'S look followed the pointing finger. Apparently he saw Jerico for the first time. Old Man Larey's voice boomed again.

"Him?" repeated Old Man Larey. "Hell! That's Jerico Jones. He's been with me all evenin'. How'd you leave things down at the yards, Jerico?"

Lance Touhy, the deputy, had stopped short at Larey's words. Sturgis' face was a mixture of surprise and wrath.

Jerico spoke calmly. "All right, Mister Larey," he answered.

"But I tell you——" cried Sturgis.

"You cain't tell me nothin'!" roared Old Man Larey. "Think I don't know my own men? Come on, boys, le's get outa here! Come on, Jerico."

Hard faced Texans closed in about Jerico Jones. Old Man Larey seized Jerico's arm. He was swept along by the current of brawn about him. The door of the Stag loomed black. He was swept out, through that door, into the darkness of the street. Old Man Larey bent down. In a whisper that almost deafened Jerico Jones he asked a question.

"What hellishness you been into now, Jerico?" he demanded. "Hell, that was bad back there."

Jerico freed his arm from Larey's grasp. His hand sought and found Old Man Larey's. "Le's get where we can talk, Frank," he said, low voiced. "Yo're damn' right that was bad back there."

"The hotel," decided Old Man Larey. "Pat, you come along. The rest of you can hell around till twelve o'clock. You go back to camp then, an' if a damn' one of you is drunk, by God I'll have his hide!"

Around Jerico Texans chuckled. Pat, the smooth faced youth, with melancholia on his long, tanned countenance, groaned, and Old Man Larey seized Jerico's arm again.

"It's a damn' long time since I seen you, Jerico," said Old Man Larey. "You come on. I got a bottle in my room."

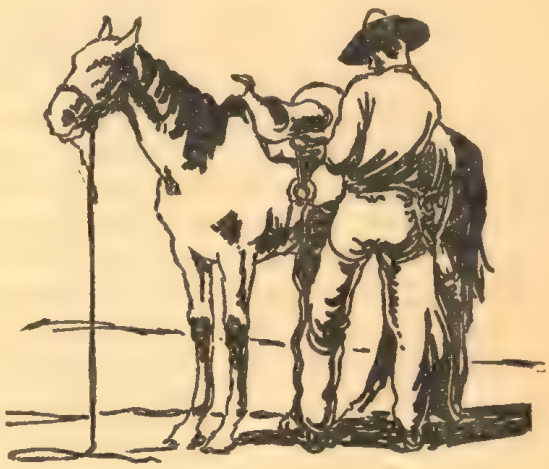
The men about the three dispersed and Jerico, walking with the giant Frank Larey on one side and the smooth faced Pat on the other, went down the street. They had gone but a short distance when Jerico recalled his horse.

"I got a horse back there with a bullet burn on his neck," he said, stopping short. "I reckon I better look after him."

Larey and Pat had stopped when Jerico did. Larey shook his head. "You let that horse alone," he commanded. "What for lookin' kind of a horse is he?"

"Gray," replied Jerico. "He's tied to a hitch rail back there in front of a store. One bridle rein's rope. I'd like to get him stabled."

"Bullet burn, yuh said?" questioned Larey. "You let that horse alone. You'll make a damn' liar out of me yet, Jerico.



Pat, you go look after that horse. Take him down to the yards an' feed him. Then come back."

Without a word the youth, Pat, turned back and Larey, tucking his arm through Jerico's, drew him along.

Larey was stopping at the Hoffman House, Niroba's one hotel. He got his room key from the clerk behind the desk in the lobby, and followed by the clerk's curious glance, he and Jerico climbed a flight of stairs, went down a corridor, and let themselves into a room. Larey lit the lamp, threw his hat on the bed and, sitting down beside the hat, began the laborious process of removing his boots. Jerico

chose a chair and bringing out papers and tobacco, rolled a thin quill of smoke.

"Where you been these last few years, Jerico?" asked Larey, tugging at a boot.

"Here an' there," replied Jerico. "After I left the Rangers I ranched it for a spell. Then I took to buyin' cattle. That's my business now."

LAREY'S boot came off and he almost fell over backward. "I tol' you to look me up when you got tired of the Rangers," he chided. "What you doin' up here?"

"Lookin' for some grass to lease," Jerico answered. "I got a chance to get a little bunch of steers an' I thought I'd hold 'em on some grass this winter an' go to market next fall. The price of cattle is lookin' up."

"The cow business is a good business," said Larey sententiously. "I've allus found it such. I got some steers, Jerico."

"So I heard." Jerico's voice was dry.

"Damn that Bond Sturgis!" flared Larey. "The cheap little crook!"

Jerico was silent. Larey, both boots off now, stretched himself out on the bed with a contented sigh. "What kind of a jackpot are you in?" he demanded suddenly. "What did Sturgis mean callin' you a killer?"

Jerico knocked the ash from his cigarette toward a corner. "I'll tell you," he said. With brief laconic sentences he described the happenings of the afternoon. Larey listened attentively, nodding now and again.

"It looks to me," said Jerico in conclusion, "as though it was the same old story. The big outfit hoggin' the grass. When a little man starts up he's a rustler an' treated as such. That's the way it looks."

"I run a big outfit," drawled Larey. "Iffen you ask me, most of these little grangers are rustlers."

"I don't deny it," Jerico spoke slowly. Suddenly anger flared in his voice. "Damn it though, Frank! I liked the looks of that kid. He was a rider an' a hand an' he never had a chance."

There was a knock on the door. Larey boomed, "Come in," and the smooth faced youth, Pat Fallon, entered the room.

"I took that horse down to the yards," he said, reporting. "Fed him an' put the saddle over by our stuff. Cookie ain't there, Mister Larey."

"Out gettin' drunk, likely," grunted Larey. "Jerico, this here is Pat Fallon, my wife's sister's kid."

"The last name is Jones," said Jerico, rising and holding out his hand.

There was a flicker of interest in Pat Fallon's hazel eyes. "You used to be a sergeant in the Rangers, didn't you?" he asked, shaking Jerico's extended hand.

Jerico said, "Yeah," and Pat Fallon walked over and squatted down against the wall. There he rolled a smoke and lit it, his eyes squinted against the curling fumes of tobacco.

"Jerico was just tellin' me about a little trouble he seen," commented Larey. "A man was killed north of town today an' they're tryin' to hang it on Jerico. You don't reckon none of the boys will talk too much, do you, Pat?"

"They heard you in the Stag," said Pat briefly. "I reckon they'll keep their mouths shut."

There was silence for a moment. Jerico studied Pat Fallon, squatting against the wall. Pat was examining his cigarette. He spoke suddenly.

"What do we do tomorrow? Get cars an' start them steers back for Texas?"

An oath boomed from Frank Larey's lips. "Not by a damn' sight!" he exclaimed.

Pat Fallon was silent and Jerico looked over at Larey. "What's the trouble, Frank?" he asked.

"That damn' Sturgis," swore Larey. "Last spring he was down to the ranch lookin' things over an' he give me an order for a thousand head of steers, laid down here. We agreed on twenty-five dollars with him havin' the privilege of cuttin'

back five per cent an' buyin' 'em for fifteen dollars. I thought his word was good an' I wrote him we was shippin' an' started the steers. I didn't hear from him so, after I'd waited awhile I packed up an' come. You heard what happened down in the Stag?"

"I heard you offer him a million dollars for his layout, yeah," said Jerico dryly.

"I'd of give it to him, too," boomed Larey. "The dirty double crossin' skunk."

"Well?" said Jerico. "It looks like a tough spot, Frank. You got the shippin' money in them steers an' yo're stuck."

"Not by a damn sight I ain't stuck," flared Larey. "I'll get a place an' run them steers myse'f before I'll let him put it over on me!"

Jerico's eyes narrowed. "You got it in for Sturgis then," he said slowly. "So have I. Damn it, every time I close my eyes I see that kid."

"What kid?" Pat Fallon spoke from beside the wall. Jerico looked at him.

"The kid I saw killed," he said gravely. "He was about yore age."

AGAIN he repeated the story he had told Larey. Pat Fallon listened silently, his face expressionless. Jerico finished his tale. Larey stirred on the bed. The Old Man was restless.

"I'd like to teach Sturgis a damn' good lesson!" he muttered.

"You can," Jerico said simply.

Larey sat up on the bed. "How?" he demanded.

Jerico moved a hand gently. "Why," he said, "I'm lookin' for steers. I ain't in shape to pay no twenty-five thousand dollars for a bunch, but if I was to find a little place an' lease it, an' you was to give me some steers to run on shares till next fall, I don't reckon anybody'd be the loser. I reckon a man could pick up a place around here, a little place."

Larey leaned back on the bed again. His eyelids formed thin slits through which blue gleamed faintly. Pat Fallon's face was still expressionless.

"An' you think you could find a place around here?" questioned Larey at length.

"Pretty sure of it," said Jerico. "If the Bar S is treatin' all the little fellows like I seen today there's bound to be somebody that wants to pull out from under."

There was silence for a moment. Each of the three was thinking. Pat Fallon spoke suddenly. "I like this country," he said. "You can pay me off, Mister Larey. Mister Jones, could you use a man?

"You damn' fool!" growled Frank Larey. "Shut up an' let yore betters think!"

Silence again. Presently Larey shook his head. "It won't do," he said, half aloud.

Jerico got to his feet. "That's that, then," he commented, his voice level. "Frank, I'm obliged to you for what you done tonight. I reckon——"

"Set down, you damn' fool," said Larey. "A thousand head ain't enough. This here country is open range, most of it, ain't it?"

Jerico sat down. There was something coming. "From what I hear, it is," he answered.

Again Old Frank Larey withdrew into his mind. Over against the wall Pat Fallon rolled a cigarette and studied Jerico with blank, expressionless eyes.

LAREY sat up swiftly. "The Long L is goin' to start a steer ranch," he announced abruptly. "I'm pickin' out Niroba because it's close to market an' all. Jerico, yo're foreman with a workin' interest in the cattle. Pat, yo're straw boss. Maw has been after me to start you in the cow business anyhow. Besides that I'm tired of yore wet nursin' me. We'll lease a little place an' put around a thousand head of steers on it. Then, owin' to favorable reports from my foreman, I'll ship about two thousand more. Three thousand Chihuahuas ought to make a purty pitcher in anybody's front yard. So, Pat?"

Pat Fallon let go a long, thin jet of smoke. "A mighty pretty picture," he

corroborated. "I'll take back that quit I made awhile ago, Uncle Frank."

"Jerico?" questioned Larey.

"We can try her," replied Jerico doubtfully. "Of course there's some things to think about. Range hogs ain't popular, you know, an' there's bound to be trouble."

"Trouble!" Old Frank Larey worried the word like a dog does a bone. "Since when did you start considerin' trouble, Jerico? There's other things to think about besides that. There's my steers, f'instance, an' that kid an'——"

"Why sure," said Pat Fallon. "Cert'nly."

"All right," agreed Jerico. "I'll be a reckless fool kid again with you, Frank. I got nine thousand dollars to throw in for an ante."

Larey shook his head. "You don't ante money in this game," he said. "I'm puttin' up the money an' the cattle. I take half the net profit. You take a fourth an' Pat gets a eighth."

"That leaves an eighth," objected Jerico.

"That's a bonus," grinned Larey. "You an' Pat can get it if you do the job."

Jerico's face was hard. "My gun ain't for sale," he announced harshly. "I——"

"An' I ain't hirin' it," flared Larey. "Yo're too damn' touchy, Jerico. We'll just leave that eighth hangin' up for a bonus."

Jerico leaned back in his chair. "All right," he said slowly. "That's that. The eighth's a bonus. Now we got things to talk about. There's a crew to get, an' saddle stock an' an outfit an' a place to lease. There's——"

Larey waved a hand. "Start earnin' yore bonus," he commanded. "Them things are yore lookout. I ain't furnishin' ridin' stock or an outfit or a crew. I'm just furnishin' the steers and the money."

Pat Fallon got to his feet. "Yo're right about that except for one thing," he said flatly. "That's the crew. We got a crew, Mister Jones. Uncle Frank is furnishin' it. When I talk to the boys I *know* they'll like this country."

Larey laughed. "There's a bottle in my grip," he said. "Le's take a drink to the Long L steer ranch."

Pat Fallon brought out the bottle and it went the rounds. When Larey had handed it back to Pat, Jerico spoke again. "There's still some things to settle," he said.

Larey nodded. He had risen from the bed to drink, and now sitting down he reached for his boots again. "We got to get 'em settled, too," he announced. "There's a train out of here at one o'clock an' I'm goin' on it."

Jerico was thoughtful. He wished that the Old Man would stick around at least long enough to see that the Chihuahuas were out on grass but if Larey wanted to go why he, Jerico was willing. He was perfectly competent to see that those steers were taken care of.

"You better write out a power of attorney for Fallon, here," he said. "An' we're goin' to need some money."

Larey finished with his boots. "Why not make the things out to you?" he asked.

"Might be some trouble over that shootin'," answered Jerico. "Besides, Pat here will want to talk to yore boys an'——"

"All right," Larey grunted. He searched his pockets, produced a short stub of pencil and a brand book, and on an empty page, with his lips working as he wrote, scrawled for a short time. When he had finished he tore out the page and extended it to Pat Fallon.

"Here's yore power of attorney," he announced. "Now, how much cash you goin' to need?"

"I dunno," Jerico spoke doubtfully. "We——"

FROM his hip pocket Frank Larey produced a plethoric purse. He opened it, looked at the contents, grunted and putting the purse on the bed, delved beneath his shirt.

"I been travelin' heeled for considerable time," he commented as he performed a

series of contortions. "Now if that damn' safety pin—— There!" From beneath his shirt he pulled a long leather strap. There were pockets on the strap. It was a money belt.

"Thousand be enough?" questioned Frank Larey, looking at Jerico.

"For now," agreed Jerico. "I got a little myself."

The old man opened a flap on the belt. A thick wad of green currency came from the flap. The old man wet a thumb and began to peel money from the roll. Fifteen times the thumb slipped off a bill. There was still money in the roll when Larey finished.

"There's fifteen hundred," he said. "Now—I'm goin' to throw my duds in my warsack an' get to hell out of here."

As the Old Man packed his few clothes Jerico and Fallon sat on the bed and talked. Plans were considered, events foreseen as best they might be and when finally the three left the room, Pat carrying Larey's worn old telescope grip, things were pretty well aranged. At the desk Larey paid his bill and all three went down to the depot.

They had half an hour to wait, which they spent in the waiting room, smoking, talking low voiced, and when finally the east bound train wailed its station call, they went out to the platform.

The train pulled in. Jerico and Fallon accompanied Larey to the chair car. The Old Man shook hands with them both. "I'll keep the steers comin'," he promised. "You let me know how things are. You can wire me. Mainly I want that you boys should take care of yoreselves. Pat, I'll tell Maw that yo're all right. Be good." He swung up on the step and grinned back at the two on the platform. Down the line a lantern waved, a brakeman called, "ALL aboard!" and with the clanking and a snort from the train Old Man Larey started back to Marfa.

When the train was gone the two men left behind looked at each other and grinned slowly. "Well," said Jerico.

"Well," said Pat Fallon, "what do we do now, Mister Jones?"

"Jerico," said Jones firmly. "Mister is for the boss. I reckon we better round up the boys, Pat, an' get 'em down to where you're camped. It looks like a heavy day tomorro'."

"The Old Man told 'em midnight," grinned Pat. "That means by mornin'. I guess we might as well look around a little an' pick up what we can."

TURNING, side by side, they started back from the depot toward Niroba's still lighted and busy street.

Rounding up the Long L crew was easier said than done. Some of the men were playing poker. Two were in a game of Kelly pool and wanted to finish it. They failed entirely to find the cook, and so presently Jerico and Pat gave it up. Old Man Larey had paid his hands that afternoon and the Long L men were spending their money. It was well toward two o'clock when Jerico and Pat Fallon walked down to the stock yards and stopped close by the fence where the Long L had established a temporary camp.

"The Old Man believes in holdin' his men close together," said Pat wryly when they reached the camp site. "He travels with bed rolls an' a chuck wagon even when he's on a train."

"You got saddles with yuh?" suggested the practical Jerico.

"Sure," answered Fallon. "We figgered to mebbe drive these steers to wherever Sturgis wanted 'em delivered. We got bed rolls, saddles an' a cookin' outfit. We even got a cook. I tell you we traveled in style, eatin' in the caboose an' al. Hell, down around Marfa the Old Man owns the country an' the railroad too. They even give us a way car to come through with the cattle."

Jerico was silent a minute. Fallon seated himself on a bed roll and then got up. "It's awful quiet," he remarked.

"Just what I been thinkin'," rejoined Jerico.

"I wonder—" began Pat. He walked over toward the white paneled fence of the yards that gleamed dully in the semi-darkness of the night. Jerico waited a moment and then followed. They reached the fence and peered through the panels. Pat shook his head as though he didn't believe his eyes.

"There was steers in this pen when I left," he said.

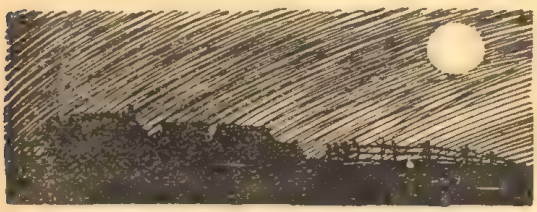
"Mebbe," said Jerico.

Pat swore softly. "Mebbe, hell!' he snapped. "I'll bet——"

He left the fence and moving swiftly, Jerico beside him, went around the long wing of the pen. On the far side he stopped. The gate was open. Pat went through the gate and across the empty pen. On the far side of the pen they came to another open gate.

"The damn'——" began Pat.

Jerico laughed softly. There was a hard, grim note in the laughter. "Saved us some trouble, didn't they?" said Jerico Jones.



"Them steers won't have to be fed, come mornin'. They been turned out to grass."

"I'll save Sturgis some trouble!" Pat Fallon's voice was hard. "I'll——"

"We don't know that Sturgis had a thing to do with this," snapped Jerico. "We cain't prove a thing on him. No!"

"Then what do we do?" challenged Fallon. "Lie down an' take this like a bogged calf?"

"We go to bed," said Jerico slowly. "We turn in like we hit camp too drunk to know a thing. In the mornin' we get up and be surprised as hell. Then we buy some horses, get a wagon an' grub an' start out to round up these steers."

"Yo're the boss." There was a tinge of contempt in Fallon's voice.

"So I am," said Jerico sweetly. "That's why we'll do what I say. There's always a break in a thing like this an' if yo're just innocently trailin' along with both eyes open yo're sometimes in shape to take the break when it comes. Let's turn in, Pat. In the mornin' we'll get strung out. Mebbe this ain't so bad after all."

FALLON grunted, seemed ready to say something and thinking better of it, closed his lips in a straight firm line and began to unlash a bed roll. "I reckon you better crawl in with me," he remarked, when the bed was unrolled.

"Why sure," returned Jerico cheerfully. He sat down on the unrolled bed and began to pull off a boot. "Don't yuh think too hard of me, Pat," he said when the boot came off. "I'm gettin' an idea that this is just the start of it. I got an idea that in the mornin' we'll run into some grief that *is* grief. Just keep a lookin' forward—that's my motto. They's always an end to a road."

Fallon grunted. He, too, was tugging at a boot. "I aim to be there," he said briefly. "Right there when the end of the road comes around."

"Why," drawled Jerico Jones, "so do I, Pat. So do I."

Undressed, they rolled and smoked good night cigarettes in silence and then sliding down between the soogans of Pat Fallon's bed, each arranged himself for comfort and said a brief good night. There was quiet over the little camp. In perhaps half an hour Pat Fallon stirred and propped himself up on an elbow.

"Jerico," he said softly, "are you asleep, Jerico?"

Jerico rolled over on his back. Pat waited a moment. A faint snore arose from Jerico. The snores gained in volume. Pat Fallon slumped back on his blankets. Mister Jerico Jones, apparently without a worry in the world, was sleeping the sleep of the just.

It was fully five o'clock before the Long L camp stirred. Men crawled out from

blankets with sullen curses, rubbed the sleep from their eyes and spat from mouths that were dry as cotton and tasted like an old boot. Having rubbed away the sleep some of them discovered the empty yards. Immediately there were curses and turmoil. Pat Fallon, up, dressed and bright eyed, listened to the Long L hands. He let them curse themselves out before he said more than a word or two. When finally the first surprise had worn off and the Long L men were clothed, he called them together.

"The Old Man's gone," he said briefly. "So are the steers. We got a job to do. This here is Jerico Jones. He's in charge."

Jerico, who had stood by, was now the center of interest. The Long L men stared at him. There was a muttered curse or two. Jerico took a step forward.

"Mister Larey an' me went into pardnership last night," he said. "We're goin' to lease a place an' run steers up here. Fallon said that we might pick up a crew from you fellows."

A little banty of a man close by Jerico spat disdainfully. "Where in hell are the steers?" he queried.

Jerico grinned and waved an arm. "Out there," he said, gesturing toward the brown range that stretched away toward the rolling Rock Rib hills.

Pat Fallon spoke. "I told Jones that we could get a crew here," he announced. "If any of yuh don't want to stay there'll be a train out of here this afternoon an' we got passes."

NO ONE moved. Jerico stared around the little circle of hard, weathered faces that clustered about him. For the most part these men were young. The cook, tanned and worn, was the oldest of the lot; next to the cook was a man of perhaps fifty. Except for those two there was not a Long L man over thirty.

"I'd like to know these fellows' names, Pat," said Jerico.

Pat Fallon pointed to the cook. "That's Doughgod Smith," he said. "He's Nebraska Williams," pointing to the older man next the cook. "That little bitty fello' is Marty Rafferty. Nig Bell is next him an' that big towhead is Swede Hanson. The kid next him is Blake Wade. That's the size of the pile."

Jerico nodded to each in turn. "Le's set down," he said.

Smith, the cook, had built a little fire. The men squatted around it, Jerico with the rest.

Doughgod spoke up. "I know you, Jones," he said. "I was ridin' for Frank Larey when that li'l trouble come up over to Marfa."

"I thought I'd seen you," replied Jerico. "I got somethin' I want to lay out to you fellows. You heard Old Man Larey claim me last night?"

There were nods around the circle. "Well," said Jerico, "you knew the old man was lyin'. Here's what happened."

Briefly then he told the listening men of what had happened at the lonely ranch. They listened intently. Now and again one looked at another. When Jerico finished there was dead silence.

"Now," said Jerico, "these Chihuahua steers you been nursin' are gone. We figgered to run a little spread up here, Larey an' Pat an' me. We thought mebbe we could lease a little place an' put sev'ral steers in this country. Larey figgered she'd graze about three thousand head."

Around the circle faces lightened. Slow grins cracked weathered gravity.

"Of course," continued Jerico, "we'd want men we knew. Fellows we could sort of depend on. You know——"

Old Nebraska, weathered and wise, spat into the fire. "I'd never figgered to winter this far north again," he mourned. "You fellers are goin' to need sheepskins an' hair pants."

Marty Rafferty, nervous fingers curling brown paper about tobacco, grunted contemptuously. "Hair pants!" he scoffed. "What you goin' to wear, Nebrasky? A silk nighty?"

"You get us some horses an' we'll start

roundin' up our little bunch of steers pronto," suggested Nig Bell, his dark face split in a grin. "It'ud be a shame to have 'em eat all this good Bar S grass."

Jerico grinned back at the circle of faces. "Le's eat breakfast," he suggested, "then mebbe we can go to work."

Pat Fallon, beside Jerico, spoke four soft words: "We got a crew."

Doughgod stirred up breakfast. The crew ate, threw their soiled dishes in the pan, and the cook and Blake Wade, the kid of the outfit, fell to washing the dishes. Jerico and Pat Fallon strolled apart from the others.

"Notice that my horse is gone," said Jerico. "Where'd you put him, Pat?"

"In an empty pen," answered Fallon. "Yore saddle's with the rest, though."

"Yeah," said Jerico. "Bridle, too. Bridle's got a rope rein."

"Might get that fixed," said Fallon. "Nig," he called, "come here a minute, will yuh?"

Nig Bell came over. "Jones has a rope rein on his bridle," Fallon informed Bell. "I wonder if we cain't get it fixed. There might be some questions asked if the law come around."

"I got a pair of bridle reins in my war sack," said Bell. "I'll put 'em on. What do you want said if the law does come?"

"Just that Jones was with the Old Man yesterday. The Old Man didn't get in till noon an' come right over here, you remember?"

Bell nodded and turned away. "What do we do now, Jerico?" asked Pat.

Jerico looked at his watch. "Let's see where we can find some horses," he said.

Fallon nodded. The two went back to the fire, informed the men there that they were going up town and gave orders that the Long L hands were to stay close to camp. Then, side by side, they strolled toward the town.

The Stag was their first calling point. The bartender there on early shift suggested one or two men who might supply them with mounts. "Sturgis might sell yuh some," he said innocently. "The Bar S has got plenty of ridin' stock."

PAT and Jerico grinned at each other, found out where one of the horse owners lived, and went on out.

Carpenter, the man to whom they had been directed, was at home. He had just finished breakfast and was at the barn back of his house, hitching a team. When Jerico and Pat introduced themselves and made known the purpose of their visit Carpenter stopped his operations and listened. When they had finished he announced that he might be able to supply their wants. There was some talk of prices and then Jerico drew Pat aside.

"You go on out with him an' look over what he's got," directed Jerico. "We got to trade pretty close. We ain't got a lot of money when it comes to buyin' horses."

"What you goin' to do?" asked Pat.

"Stick around town. I got an idea that there's goin' to be somethin' movin' around here an' I want to be in on it."

Pat shook his head. "You come along," he said. "We'll take Nebraska with us. He can bring back what we buy." He stepped away from Jerico and addressed Carpenter again. "How far out is your place?"

Carpenter finished hooking a tug and looked up. "Ten miles," he said. "Take a little over an hour to get there."

Jerico and Pat again entered into consultation. "These are broom tails he's got," said Jerico. "Suppose we just take all the boys out? I don't want 'em layin' around town. They might talk too much an' they might get into trouble."

Pat grunted and spoke again to Carpenter. "How many of us can you take?" he asked.

"Two or three," answered Carpenter.

Jerico shrugged. "Let's go," he said.

They got into the buckboard with the horse owner, and Carpenter drove on down the street. He stopped at a store to load some supplies and then took his two passengers to the camp at the yards. There

Jerico and Pat loaded in their saddles, picked up Nebraska Williams, and leaving orders for the other members of the crew to stay close to camp, climbed back in the buckboard and were whirled away.

It took them a full hour and a half to reach Carpenter's ranch. There was not much talk on the journey. When they arrived at their destination Carpenter sent a man out to run in a bunch of horses and another hour elapsed before the bunch was brought in and penned.

For the most part the animals were young, unbroken, and wild as hawks. There were a few broken animals in the bunch, however. Jerico and Pat made selections, haggled back and forth with Carpenter, and finally at the end of some three hours, made the deal. Jerico paid over seven hundred and fifty dollars and Carpenter made out a bill of sale for twenty-six head. With the business transacted the men went to the house and ate dinner and when the meal was done Pat, Nebraska and Jerico went back to the corral, roped out broken horses and saddled them. Mounting, they then pushed the horses out of the corral and started back toward Niroba.

Riding together in the rear of the little bunch, Jerico and Pat, once they were well away from the ranch, fell into conversation.

"Pretty good bunch," Pat said, referring to the horses.

Jerico grunted. "Goin' to be a man-sized rodeo when we start out," he commented. "About half them horses are just stake broke an' that's all."

Pat grinned. "They'll get rode," he prophesied. "The next week or so will see them horses broke."

JERICO bent his horse away to turn a bay gelding that tried to break back. When he rejoined Pat he, too, was grinning. "Broke horses cost more than we can afford, Pat," he said. "How are the boys on exercise?"

"They like it," Pat returned. "Look out for that bay."

Jerico swung away again and sent the bay back into the bunch.

It didn't take as long to return to Niroba as it had to go out. They swung their horses wide of the town, came into the yards from the east and pushed their bunch into a pen. When the gate was closed the three riders dismounted. All the Long L men were at the fence looking over their prospective mounts.

"Anythin' goin' on while we was gone?" Pat asked Marty Rafferty.

Marty spat into the dust. "That damn' deputy was down, hintin' around," he answered. "Say, Pat, how about givin' me that roan an' that dun horse in my string? I like the looks of 'em."

"We'll draw straws for first pick," answered Pat. "You hear what he said, Jerico?"

Jerico nodded. "That's what I was afraid of," he said. "What did the sheriff say, Marty?"

"Asked about you," answered Rafferty. "We sent him off talkin' to himself."

Jerico stood for a moment, looking into the corral; then he turned, walked away from the fence and called the men to him. "Listen," he said when they were assembled. "It looks like mebbe I was in for some grief. There's all the signs. Now get this an' get it straight: when I'm gone Pat's the boss. He carries the ramrod. Lackin' Pat, Nebraska takes charge. Get that?"

There were nods around the circle.

"What you think is goin' to happen?" queried the irrepressible Marty. "You think that Sturgis an' that deputy are goin' to start somethin'? If they do we'll——"

"You'll stay out of it!" snapped Jerico. "First, last an' all the time yo're workin' for the Long L an' there's a thousand head of steers out there for you to look after. Get that?"

Again heads nodded, slower this time.

"We're goin' to start a roundup," pronounced Jerico. "We're goin' to get away

from here before dark. Blake, yo're horse wrangler. You'll nighthawk for us. Doughgod, you take some money an' go up town. Buy what grub you need an' get a couple of pack saddles. This is goin' to be a pack outfit from here on. When you boys pick yore horses be sure you get a broke horse that'll carry a bed. Nebraska knows 'em. That old gray an' the claybank are pack horses; Doughgod gets 'em for the chuck. Now you can pick yore strings an' remember, no matter what happens you got to look after them steers."

The faces of the Long L men were serious. There were slow nods of understanding. Jerico turned abruptly and walked away from the men and after a moment Pat followed him.

"What do you think is comin', Jerico?" questioned Pat when he had caught up. "Do you think——?"

"I think they're goin' to make it as tough on us as they can," Jerico returned.

Pat made no comment. Back by the camp Marty Rafferty was pulling a straw from Doughgod's clenched hand. His wild whoop of glee carried to Jerico and Pat.

"I reckon Marty gets the roan," grinned Jerico.

There was a great deal of confusion after the lots had been made. Jerico, as boss, naturally had first pick and Pat Fallon followed Jerico. They pointed out the horses they wanted, each taking one broken horse and two broom tails. Blake Wade, as horse wrangler got two well broken mounts and Doughgod a broke horse and two pack animals. The others singled out their mounts, Swede Hanson, the unlucky last getting the leavings. When the horses had been picked Doughgod and Nebraska went up town for supplies, and Marty, Swede, and Nig, on one pretext or another, also departed. Jerico, Pat and Blake Wade remained at the camp. The men who had gone to town were to return as quickly as possible, for Jerico wanted to get away.

DOUGHGOD and the others had been gone for perhaps fifteen minutes when a man strolled around the corner of the yards and came toward the piled bedding of the Long L men. It was Touhy, the deputy sheriff. As he strolled into the camp Jerico rose from a bed roll to meet him.

Touhy stopped, nodded to Pat Fallon and Blake Wade and then looked at Jerico. "Yore name's Jones, I hear," he said slowly.

"Jerico Jones," affirmed Jerico.

"You was with Larey all day yesterday, I reckon?" Touhy drawled the words.

"That's what Larey says," replied Jerico, eyeing the officer.

"What do you say?" Touhy was blunt.

"You wouldn't have me make my boss out a liar, would you?" Jerico grinned faintly.

"Somebody's a liar," Touhy's narrow eyes were fixed on Jerico. "Bond Sturgis swears that yo're the fellow that was at Macklin's yesterday."

"Does he?"

"Yeah. More'n that he says yo're the fellow that shot Bob Macklin."

"You come down to arrest me for that?" Jerico was as blunt as the officer.

Touhy shrugged. "No," he answered. "Kinda tough about yore steers."

"Kinda."

"Got any idea how they got out?"

Jerico grinned. "*You* got any ideas?" he asked pointedly.

Touhy shook his head. "I hear that the

watchman was drunk," he answered. "The agent says he's goin' to fire him."

"Good idea." Jerico was playing his cards close to his vest.

Touhy strolled over and looked down at the bedding and the riding gear. "Where's Larey?" he asked.

"Headed home," Jerico walked over and stood beside Touhy. The deputy moved away from the beds.

"Too bad," Touhy stopped beside the cooking outfit. "Mebbe Larey an' Sturgis could of dealt for them steers."

"You got a warrant for me?" Jerico's sudden question was blunt.

Touhy shook his head.

"If I had I'd serve it," he said, his eyes staring levelly into Jerico's own.

Jerico said slowly, "I believe you would."

"Don't never make no mistakes about that." Touhy's voice was not hard, it was simply firm. "I'm workin' as deputy sheriff. I try to do the job."

"An' no other?" Jerico asked softly.

"An' no other," agreed Touhy.

"Well then?" intoned Jerico.

"Larey said you was with him. Sturgis said you wasn't. There's no warrant been swore out." Touhy paused.

"You *could* make an arrest," suggested Jerico.

"I could, but I won't. I've heard of Frank Larey. So has others."

"I see," assented Jerico.

Suddenly Touhy grinned, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I'll go sell my papers," he announced. "So long, Jones."

"So long," Jerico said absently.

Touhy, still grinning, walked away. As soon as the deputy was out of earshot Pat Fallon spoke. "Workin' for Sturgis!" he muttered.

Jerico shook his head. "Nope," he drawled. "Didn't you sabe what he was tryin' to tell me, Pat?"

Fallon shook his head. "I sabe that he used to be Sturgis' wagonboss," he announced.

"He was tryin' to tell me that he'd 'tend to his business, that there wasn't no warrant out for me an' that Larey's bluff last night had got over with Sturgis. I believe he's a good square shooter, Pat."

Pat Fallon grunted his disbelief.

"That's right," insisted Jerico. "I kind of like that old boy."

"Mebbe." Pat was doubtful.

"I been thinkin'," Jerico spoke slowly, marshalling his ideas, "we want a place to hold these steers, sort of a headquarters that will give us some rights in this country."

"Yeah?" Pat was noncommittal.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't Macklin's make us a good place? I've a mind——"

"A mind to do what?"

"A mind to ride out there an' see."

Pat Fallon revolved the idea. "It might not be bad at that," he agreed finally. "If you want to prod Sturgis——"

"Sturgis has been doin' all the proddin' up to now," reminded Jerico. "It's time we done a little. That would sure make him ringy. We'll pull out when the boys come back. Go up the railroad till we hit wood an' water an' then make camp. Tomorrow I'll ride over to Macklin's an' talk business with whoever's over there. Mebbe I can pull it off."

"*We'll* ride over," amended Pat. "Nebraska can start the boys on circle tomorrow. We'll need somebody that knows the country, too. You thought of that?"

"I reckon we can get somebody," agreed Jerico. "Here comes Marty back from town an' Nig's with him. Let's get started, Pat."

THE Long L pulled out of Niroba without difficulty. To be sure one of Doughgod's pack horses put up an argument against the load, and both Nig Bell and Marty Rafferty chose unbroken horses, "just for the hell of it," and there was a little rodeo before the broncs were subdued, but as far as interference by Touhy or any of the townsmen was concerned there just wasn't any. Jerico started the men and the outfit up the tracks and some

six miles above the town, with dusk falling rapidly, they reached a little stream and a bunch of cottonwoods. There they camped.

At Jerico's orders night horses were kept up. Wood was brought in, a fire flickered and Doughgod started supper. Jerico and Pat, sitting on their bed rolls, talked over the work with Nebraska who sat close by.

"My idea," said Jerico, "is that those steers was give a good push. I don't think they're scattered much, I just think that they was turned loose and pushed out to grass. I don't think Sturgis will spread 'em."

"I think that he would," contradicted Pat. "I think that likely they was split up in little bunches and shoved in about all directions. That's what I'd do."

"Yeah," drawled Jerico, "but you don't own the country, Pat. Sturgis does. He's goin' to play a hand with us an' he's dealt the cards. I don't think he's so worried about the steers; I think he's goin' to lay into us."

There was silence for a moment and then Nebraska spoke up. "We can make a little circle in the mornin'," he said. "I think that what was done was this: I think that the steers was pushed a ways and then let drop out. These fellers are cowmen. They'd make it look natural."

"Mebbe," said Jerico. "Anyhow a little circle will show. You'll have to take the boys out, Nebraska. Pat an' me are goin' to make a ride in the mornin'."

Nebraska looked his question.

"Over to Macklin's," explained Jerico. "We're goin' to try to lease the place."

Nebraska said, "Oh!" thought a moment as though about to ask a question, then thought better of it.

From the fire Doughgod called, "Come an' git it!" The Long L men rose and shifted toward the blaze.

Jerico kept a lookout at the camp that night. Blake Wade stayed with the horses and the others took turns just as though they were standing guard on a herd. There was no disturbance. The camp was peaceful and when morning broke and the men crawled from their soogans there was some amusement and some kidding concerning the precautions that had been taken. Still, all the crew knew that those precautions had been necessary and there was no complaint.

With breakfast finished and the horses run into a rope corral in the cottonwoods, each man singled out a mount. Marty Rafferty was told off to day-herd the horses. Blake Wade rustled wood for Doughgod and then turned in, and Nebraska, under Jerico's direction, started out with Nig and the Swede.

"Stick close together," warned Jerico. "Tomorrow when Pat an' me are with you we'll cover the country. Right now we're just lookin' it over. If you find any cattle bring 'em in but don't burden yoreselves."

The three nodded their understanding and rode off. When they were gone Jerico and Pat also mounted and with Jerico leading the way, rode north.

JERICO had the faculty of seeing a country once and keeping it in his head. He had left the Macklin ranch in a hurry and with lead flying after him, but he pointed straight for it. Pat rode along beside Jerico, not asking questions as to the direction they took, but rather filled with curiosity as to what they would do after they got there.

Jerico shook his head to Pat's queries. "I don't know what we'll do," he said. "I don't know who's at the place or nothin' about it. We may just be wastin' time. From what I heard Sturgis say he dispossessed the Macklins. Mebbe that means he done it legal an' mebbe it means that he was just throwin' a bluff. We'll go see."

That was all the satisfaction that Pat could get and he had to be content with it.

With Jerico pointing the trail they made steady progress and presently Jerico reined in his mount. "This," he informed Pat, "is the gulch I crossed when I left the corral. You stay here with the horses;

I'm goin' to coon up to the top of the ridge an' take a look."

He swung down from his horse, tendered a rein to Pat and then started up the ridge. Near the top he crouched, crawled a little distance, and then pulling off his hat lay flat and crawled further. At the top he stopped and lay for some time looking over the ridge. Then he reversed his trail and presently was back at Pat's side.

"There's somebody there, Pat," he said. "There's two horses at the corral fence an' the door is open. We can follow down this draw an' come in back of the barn. I reckon that's what we'll do."

"Why?" asked Pat. "Why don't we ride right on in, Jerico? I don't get this sneakin' around an'——"

Jerico smiled grimly. "Why, Pat," he said. "I reckon I should of told you. The rig on one of those horses belongs to Sturgis. I got a good look at his saddle when I was here before. I reckon we'll do a little eavesdropping."

Pat, reassured, held out Jerico's rein. Jerico took it, mounted, and turning his horse rode down the draw with Pat following close at his heels.

The draw curved north. Some distance below their first stop, Jerico halted again. Both men dismounted. Both secured their horses to convenient clumps of scrubby growth. Jerico again took the lead, went up the slope of the draw, crouched at the top and then advanced at a hasty run. Pat followed Jerico's actions exactly and arrived, panting a little, behind the log barn at Jerico's side.

They waited there a moment or two, then reconnoitered, and again with Jerico leading, went around the corral, negotiated a fence and arrived close against the side of the house. Here they paused and then went forward until they were at the end of the building with only the porch in front of them. The two stood listening. Voices came to them, voices that were indistinct. Jerico shook his head. All their precautions had been useless. Pat tugged at Jerico's shirt.

"Window," he whispered, pointing to the one above their heads.

Jerico nodded. Pat, standing fully erect, put his hand against the window and pushed gently. It slid up a crack, noiselessly. Now they could hear.

A girl's voice came distinctly. "I have three months," it said. "I'll stay here until the redemption period is over."

Jerico's elbow jerked into Pat's ribs with such force as almost to arouse a startled grunt from the surprised youth.

"You can't stay here alone." That was Bond Sturgis' voice. "You haven't any money, by your own statement. You know that this place is mortgaged and that it's useless to stay. You——"

"You say you are a friend of mine, Mister Sturgis," the girl interrupted. "You come here offering to give me money for my equity in this place when you have only to wait for three months and take it. That's what you said, you know. I'm going to stay. This is my home. I——"

"You're a little fool!" Sturgis' voice was harsh. "I'm doing you a favor and ——"

"And I won't accept it. If you want to do me a favor, find the man who killed Bob. You say you saw him."

Jerico's elbow jerked toward Pat Fallon again and struck empty air. Jerico turned swiftly. Pat had stepped away from behind him and was walking unconcernedly toward the front of the house. Jerico took a step to follow and then thought better of it. Again he crouched by the window. Pat's boots clumped on the porch. There was the sound of a sudden movement inside the house. Pat's knuckles beat on the door and then came Pat's deep drawl.

"Oh, excuse me! Am I buttin' in?"

A pause followed the question. Jerico could hear movements in the room but he did not lift his head above the window to peer in. At the moment he was Pat's ace in the hole and he relished the rôle. Then came Sturgis' voice.

"What do *you* want? What are you doing here?"

"You own this place?" Pat was evidently talking to Sturgis for the girl's voice answered.

"*I* own it. Was there anything I could do for you?"

"Yessem." Pat took his time. The words came slowly. "I want to lease a place around here. I—that is, we—got a thousand head of steers out on grass. My boss, Frank Larey of the Long L, is startin' a steer ranch in this country. We want a place for headquarters an' to give us some water rights an' grazin' rights on the Gov'ment land around here."

THERE was a pause. Jerico would have given a good deal for a view of Sturgis' face. He raised himself cautiously, peering over the window ledge. Bond Sturgis was sitting, the side of his face toward Jerico, staring at Pat who stood in the doorway. Across from the window sat a girl, smooth haired, red lipped, her face distraught now, and eyes red from crying. Jerico liked her looks. There was character in the small, firm chin and in the eyes which were turned toward

Pat. There was another man in the room. His back was toward Jerico but even by the back Jerico recognized Webb Greves.

Pat's slow drawl went on evenly. "Is this place for lease, ma'am?"

Bond Sturgis started up from his chair. His face was dark with the angry flood of blood. His voice snarled. "No it isn't!" he rasped. "Get out, you two bit——"

"Easy!" Pat Fallon lost his drawl and his voice was hard. "I'm talkin' to a lady!"

The girl, too, came out of her chair. Her voice was eager. "I'll lease the ranch!" she said. "I——"

Jerico Jones pushed up the window. He had seen Webb Greves move. Greves' elbow was sliding back. Jerico knew the meaning of that movement. In turn he entered the conversation.

"Hold still, Greves!" warned Jerico. "Hold jus' as still as yuh can!"

Greves froze. The elbow that had been inching back, was immobile. The eyes of the others, Sturgis, the girl, and Pat Fallon, flashed to the window. Jerico stood there, looking through. For a moment all three were speechless, then the girl gasped, and Sturgis, finding his voice, rasped hoarse words.

"That's him. That's the man that killed your brother!"

Jerico flung Sturgis' words back in his teeth. "You lie, Sturgis!"

"I saw you!" Sturgis sprang up from his chair.

Jerico had neglected Greves too long. He had been looking at Sturgis too intently. Greves, noting that Pat Fallon was staring at Sturgis, took his chance. He came up out of his chair and as he moved his hand went down and back. Jerico snatched for the gun under his left arm and dodged back from the window, for Greves was turning. Pat Fallon went into action like a smooth machine. One long step he took and his left fist, backed by his weight, lashed out at Greves. The blow did not land fairly, but sent Greves reeling back, his gun half drawn. Jerico, gun out now, caught the window, threw up a leg and was half way into the room in time to stop Bond Sturgis' sudden movement. Jerico Jones was in command now, and he made the most of his moment. Greves had regained his balance but his hand fell away from his gun as he saw the weapon in Jerico's hand. Sturgis, too, stopped his draw.

There was a killing light in Jerico's blue eyes.

"You lie, Sturgis," he repeated, delib-

ately. "You lie an' you know it. It was you out by the fence when Macklin was killed, an' it was yore own pet killer, Webb Greves, that was by the barn an' that shot the boy! Greves——"

Webb Greves broke under the strain. Guilt and the menace of Jerico's gun were too much. Webb Greves spoke five words and with those five confirmed Jerico's statement. "You never seen me! I——"

Jerico swung up his other leg, preparatory to sliding into the room. The movement made Pat Fallon shift his eyes and as he did so Greves seized his opportunity. Lunging at Pat, he threw the youth off balance and sprang for the door. Pat, reeling back, masked Greves from Jerico. Jerico was clear inside. He leaped toward the door thrusting Pat aside. Sturgis, caught in the whirlwind of sudden motion took a step and stumbled. Pat caught his balance, slapped the gun from his holster and leveled it at Sturgis. Jerico, at the door, raised his gun and then lowered it slowly. Greves had reached his horse. Jerico might have shot him, but checked. Greves was weakening; he might break completely. There was a woman in the room. Jerico stepped back and slowly sheathed his gun.

"Put it up, Pat," he said wearily. "I reckon you heard him, ma'am?"

The girl's face was white. She stared first at Jerico then at Sturgis. Pat Fallon, disregarding Jerico's orders, kept his gun on Sturgis.

"Git out!" snapped Pat Fallon. "Git out, Sturgis!"

STURGIS looked first at the girl and then at the grim faced Jerico. His gaze shifted to Pat's hot eyes. He opened his mouth to speak but the words refused to come. Staggering a little, so angry that he could not control his muscles, he went toward the door. At the door he paused.

"I'll——" he began.

"Git out," ordered Pat again. Sturgis' boots clumped on the porch. Pat stood at the door, gun still out and ready.

Jerico faced the girl. "He's accused me of killin' yore brother," said Jerico slowly. "You heard what Greves said, I reckon."

"Who are you?" demanded the girl hoarsely. "What are you doing here?"

"My name's Jones," answered Jerico.

Pat Fallon shifted uneasily beside the door. Jerico gnawed at one corner of the close clipped brown mustache. The girl gripped the arms of her chair. Plainly she was fighting to control herself, trying to hold her emotions in check. Both men witnessed the struggle and its final successful outcome.

It was Jerico that broke the awkward silence. "We heard some of what was said ma'am," he announced gently. "If there's any way we can help——"

Polly Macklin, holding herself on a tight rein, interrupted. "They said you killed Bob," she began. "They said——"

"Ma'am," said Jerico earnestly, "I never killed yore brother an' I never harmed him. I was here. I seen——"

The girl leaned forward. "Tell me!" she commanded.

Jerico collected himself. He took a long step, shifted the chair which Greves had occupied, and seated himself. "I'll tell you, ma'am," he agreed. "This here is just what happened."

He kept the emotion from his voice as he recounted the story. He omitted nothing, glossed nothing over, his words were a monotonous drone. The girl listened. Once she covered her eyes with her hands and Jerico stopped and waited for her to regain control before he continued.

"That's the truth," he said, finishing his recital. "It's hard, ma'am, I know. I didn't see the killer but I did see Sturgis. I think it was Webb Greves by the barn. You heard me throw that at him an' you heard what he said. I reckon he done it. Provin' it is a different thing."

The girl lifted her head wearily. "We buried Bob yesterday," she said slowly and paused, choking back a sob. Pat Fallon

took two short steps from the door, his hand half outstretched, stopped and stepped back. Jerico waited.

"What am I to do?" queried Polly Macklin, utter futility in her voice. "I believe what you say. There is talk concerning Sturgis and the Bar S. I heard what Greves said. What must I do?"

"I don't know, ma'am," answered Jerico. "I been accused of this. I never done it. I'm going to stay here until I prove who did."

"But—" began the girl.

"We'll lease yore place," offered Pat Fallon awkwardly. "Mebbe if you had some money you could go away an'——"

Sudden anger flared in Polly Macklin's eyes. "I'm going to stay," she declared. "I'm going to stay here and find out who killed Bob! I can fight too!"

"Set down, Pat," drawled Jerico. "You don't know us, ma'am, an' I reckon it's askin' a heap for you to trust us, but there's this thing we can get together on. We'll lease yore place for six months. We'll pay you cash so you know you won't be cheated. We'll talk to anybody you want us to talk to. An'—" he paused a moment— "if there's trouble," he concluded slowly, "I reckon we can take care of it."

A long silence followed Jerico's words. Jerico sat stock still. He wanted to help this girl, wanted to do all that he could for her. He looked at Pat Fallon. Pat was watching Polly Macklin as though trying to read her mind.

Polly Macklin lifted her head. "I'll lease you the ranch," she said suddenly.

Jerico got up from his chair. "Good," he drawled.

The girl too arose. "You come back this evening," she ordered decisively. "I'm going to town to talk to Abe Whitaker. He was father's lawyer. I'll bring him out. You can talk to him tonight."

Jerico moved toward the door. "We'll get you a horse," he offered, "or if you want a team hitched——"

"I'll ride in," Polly Macklin decided. "There's a horse in the barn."

Pat Fallon went through the door to the porch. Jerico stopped at the doorway. "I'll get our horses, Pat," he said. "You saddle up for Miss Macklin. I reckon we'll side her toward town aways."

AS THE three rode south toward Niroba Jerico tried to keep a conversation going. He asked questions concerning the extent of the land that the Macklins owned. He made queries as to the winters, whether they were hard or open. While she answered him Polly Macklin made no effort to hide the fact that she didn't want to talk and finally Jerico gave up and they rode in silence. Perhaps two miles out of Niroba the two men left the girl and turned back toward their own camp. They watched her out of sight, then crossed the railroad tracks and rode back toward the north.

At the camp they found Doughgod and Blake Wade. Jerico and Pat dismounted, unsaddled and staked their horses. Wade was asleep and Doughgod had nothing to report. Jerico and Pat ate a lunch, smoked, resaddled and were ready to ride out to make a short circle when they saw a string of cattle coming in toward the cottonwood motte. They rode out to meet the drive.

Nebraska, Swede and Nig were all with the animals. Jerico, riding toward the three, made an estimate of the number in the drive. There were about a hundred head. He drew up alongside Nebraska.

The grizzled veteran made his report. "Just found these in a bunch," he drawled. "I was right, Jones. Them fellers just gave 'em a push an' then let 'em dribble off."

"Where'd you find these?" asked Jerico. "North?"

"North an' east," answered Nebraska. "We could of picked up a lot more if we'd took everything we seen. They're all mixed. What we need is about twenty men an' a wagon. If we're goin' to round

this country up we got to have a bigger crew. We——"

"They're all on grass, ain't they?" asked Jerico.

"Of course," Nebraska looked his surprise.

"Well," Jerico thought a moment, "as long as they're all gettin' a full belly every day there don't seem to be much sense in movin' 'em."

"I thought you wanted 'em bunched," Nebraska looked at Jerico from beneath raised eyebrows. "You said——"

"It looks like mebbe we'd leased a place," said Jerico. "I want a little bunch of steers that we can handle easy. I aim to close herd that bunch in one place. With the rest of 'em I just reckon we'll work along a line an' throw 'em north. Just regular cow work."

"Huh?" said Nebraska, not comprehending.

"We'll pick up another hundred head," explained Jerico. "Then we'll move 'em south an' play like we was herdin' sheep."

Nebraska got the idea. "Just rubbin' a sore spot!" he grunted.

"Sure," agreed Jerico, "an' gettin' it sorer."

"You must like a fight," said Nebraska flatly.

"Well—" drawled Jerico and left Nebraska to draw his own conclusions. Nig Bell, who had ridden close to the two, grinned and swung away to where the Swede was pointing the bunch.

At camp Jerico stayed with the bunch, loose herding them. The others rode in. Marty Rafferty brought the horses in over a hill. When Nig rode out to relieve Jerico he wore a broad grin. Evidently Pat had been answering questions.

"There's just one question I got to ask," announced Nig as he reined in beside Jerico. "When you had a gun on Greves why didn't you let her go off?"

Jerico looked at the rider. "Would you of done that?" he said dryly.

Nig's grin broadened. "Nope," he said cheerfully.

IN THE afternoon, leaving Nig with the gathered bunch, Jerico, Pat, Nebraska and the Swede rode out to pick up more Long L steers. They found it an easy thing to do. About five miles southeast of the camp the country seemed literally covered with Long L brands. The steers had not scattered much and evidently had not been pushed any too hard. The Long L men picked up approximately a hundred head and started them back. Jerico and Pat left Nebraska and the Swede to make the drive once it was well started. They had other business and rode on ahead. Back at the camp they ate again and then began their return to Macklins.

As they reached the ranch they saw Polly Macklin's horse in the corral with two other horses. Riding on in they saw the girl come from the house. There were two men with her. Dismounting, Jerico and Pat tied their horses to the corral fence and approached the house.

One of the men on the porch with the girl was short, spare and middle aged. The other was young, square built and chunky, a typical cowhand. Jerico and Pat stopped at the porch steps. Polly Macklin made the introductions.

"This is Mister Whitaker," she said, gesturing toward the older man. "Mister Jones and—" She looked at Pat.

"Pat Fallon," said Pat, blushing.

"Mister Fallon," the girl concluded. "This," looking at the younger man beside her, "is Lon Dennis. He——"

Jerico walked up the steps. "Hello, Dennis," he said, holding out his hand. "Ain't you from Hereford?"

Lon Dennis grinned broadly. "Sure," he answered. "I know you. Yo're Jerico Jones." Dennis turned toward the girl and Whitaker. "This is him, all right," he announced.

Whitaker put out his hand to Jerico. "Dennis said that he thought he knew you," he announced. "Seems like he was right. From what he says you were in the Rangers at one time."

"Yes," agreed Jerico. "Suppose we talk

some business. Fallon an' me are representin' Frank Larey of the Long L. I reckon Miss Macklin told you about our proposition?"

Whitaker nodded. "Let's go inside," he suggested.

THE little party trooped through the door and into the house. There, when they were seated, Whitaker proceeded directly to business. Terms of the proposed lease were discussed. The limits and acreage of the Macklin ranch, the Seven M, were defined. Pat produced his power of attorney from Larey and Whitaker inspected it. Finally the lawyer summed it all up.

"You can take this lease," he said slowly. "If you can put up some cash I think that I can protect you legally. We can satisfy the mortgage against the place, for the redemption period is not yet up. Sturgis may fight in court but it will take some time to settle that." He smiled thinly

as he made that statement, and Jerico grinned in sympathy. He knew that Whitaker was smart enough to cause plenty of legal delay.

"We can put up some cash," Jerico stated. "Not much right now, but some. Then, when we get hold of Frank Larey I reckon a loan could be managed to take care of the whole thing. Frank seemed to be right anxious to run steers up here."

It was Whitaker's turn to smile in sympathy. "I understand that Sturgis managed to step pretty well on Larey's toes," he said.

"All over 'em," agreed Jerico.

"That will be satisfactory then," the lawyer resumed. "I'm satisfied with what you say and as I've said I think I can look after the legal angle. As for the rest I can't say. I might as well tell you that the talk in town is that you killed Bob Macklin. Polly here," he looked at the girl, "seems to discount that talk. Lon says he knows you and——"

"Sure I know him," Lon Dennis blurted. "There's no more use sayin' he was mixed up in a murder than in sayin' I was."

Whitaker lifted his hand and Dennis stopped.

"We're all satisfied here," he announced. "The thing is that there will probably be a warrant issued for your arrest. If there should be trouble when it is served I can't say what will happen. You understand that?"

Jerico nodded. "We'll take care of that when the time comes," he said. "Let's go ahead with this lease."

Whitaker nodded. "I've prepared some papers," he announced. "We can go over them."

The lawyer produced a long envelope from his pocket and tendered it to Jerico. Jerico opened the envelope, took out the papers, and with Pat looking over his shoulder, scanned them carefully. When he finished he handed the lease and agreement back to Whitaker.

"We got around seven hundred dollars cash," he said bluntly. "You got two thousand acres here that you own. We ain't interested so much in what's owned as in what's controlled. How about that?"

Whitaker's smile was bland. "A lease gives a man a legal foothold in the country," he said. "This range is open and it is largely public domain. How is public domain usually controlled?"

"By custom," affirmed Jerico.

Whitaker nodded slowly. "And in this case?" he asked.

"You guess!" returned Jerico.

Again Mister Whitaker nodded. "How many steers did Mister Larey contemplate

putting up here?" he questioned guilelessly.

Jerico's sudden grin spread beneath the brown mustache. "Why," he drawled, "this here is a special case. The old man talked about three thousand head."

Surprise showed in Whitaker's eyes for a moment and then was banished. "I see," he intoned. "And you think that a two thousand acre lease would entitle you to graze that many?"

"How many does Sturgis graze?" parried Jerico.

"I've understood that he has perhaps ten thousand cattle." Whitaker's voice was precise.

"An' how much land does he own?" persisted Jerico.

"Off hand I should say about five thousand acres."

Jerico lifted his hand and brought it down gently on the arm of his chair. "Custom's custom," he announced cheerfully. "From now on there'll be two hogs at this trough."

The lawyer frowned for a moment and then laughed. "Hogs," he said gently.

JERICO turned abruptly and faced Lon Dennis. "You know this country?" he asked.

Dennis nodded.

"Could you use a job?"

Dennis thought for a moment. "I ain't no warrior," he said doubtfully.

"An' I ain't hirin' guns," grated Jerico.

Dennis looked steadily at Jerico, hesitated a moment, and then spoke. "I'll hire out," he agreed.

Jerico turned back to the lawyer. "Let's sign that thing," he said. "You'll be wantin' to go back to town, you an' Miss Macklin."

Polly Macklin rose from her chair. "I'm not going back to town," she stated firmly. "I'm going to stay here."

"But——" Jerico and Whitaker expostulated at once.

"There's no need of arguing about it," stated Polly Macklin. "I'm going to stay here!"

Despite the statement there was an argument. Both Whitaker and Jerico did the best that they could. Even Lon Dennis entered into the debate and in the end the one determined woman had her way.

"You can move into the bunkhouse," she told Jerico defiantly. "I leased the ranch to you, not the house."

That was that. There was nothing that could be done about it. Whitaker finally walked out in disgust, Jerico followed him, with Pat at his heels. At the corral they stopped.

"I'd admire if you wouldn't say too much about this right now," Jerico told Whitaker. "We want to be kind of quiet for awhile. There's one thing that I would like for you to do. Take care of any mail or any telegrams that come for Pat an' me, an' see that we get 'em out here. Will you do that?"

Whitaker nodded. He had a variety of things to do in Niroba and one thing more was not going to weigh him down. "Certainly," he agreed.

"Thanks," said Jerico. "Now I'll give you what we bargained for on the lease an' I reckon you'll want to go on in to town."

He counted out billls to Whitaker, took a scrawled receipt, and watched while Lon Dennis and the lawyer got their horses from the corral. Dennis was to ride in with Whitaker, get his bedding and return to the ranch. The lawyer and Jerico had a few final words and then Whitaker mounted, joined the waiting Lon and they rode off south, into the dusk.

When the two were gone Jerico turned to Pat. "I'm goin' to camp, Pat," he informed. "I reckon we'll move in the mornin'. Mebbe you'd better stay here tonight an' hold down the place."

Jerico expected a refusal, but Pat, keeping his eyes carefully averted from Jerico's face, only nodded his agreement. Jerico waited a moment, and then went to the house. He found Polly Macklin in the

kitchen busily engaged in the preparation of a meal. Jerico noticed that there was enough meat cut to feed more than one hungry person.

"I'm goin' to ride to camp now, Miss Macklin," he said. "If it's all right with you I'll leave Pat here to sort of hold down the place."

The girl looked up from her work, smiling. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright. "I was getting supper for all of us," she said. "I wish you would stay."

Jerico shook his head. "I got to go," he answered. "You go ahead an' cook what you got. Pat'll eat it." He turned then and went back to the corral. The girl preparing supper and Pat making no objection to staying! Jerico grinned to himself.

"You go on up to the house, Pat," he directed the waiting Fallon. "There's some water to pump an' you better get some wood. I'm goin' along to camp." Chuckling to himself, Jerico went to the corral for his horse.

THE Long L left their camp in the cottonwoods the next morning. With Doughgod driving his pack horses, Marty hazing the remuda along, and the others drifting the little bunch of steers that had been collected, they made the move. Without hurrying they were in at the Seven M before noon. Polly Macklin had a meal ready.

When the men had finished eating and Doughgod had assumed charge of the dishes, Polly approached Jerico. She seemed different from the girl she had been the day before. Her eyes were brighter and while occasionally she stopped short in her talk and lapsed into a long silence, she was evidently recovering from the shock of her brother's death.

"I want to talk with you, Mister Jones," she said.

Jerico nodded. "Go ahead," he directed.

The girl hesitated for a moment. "We're in this together," she announced firmly. "I want to help. I don't want you to think that my staying here is a drag on you. There are Seven M horses in the pasture and I want you to use them. I can cook. I'd like to look after that. I want to help. You've been good to me. You——"

"That's fine," agreed Jerico. He knew just what this offer meant. It meant that Polly Macklin had banished any doubts concerning the Long L and Jerico Jones, from her mind. He knew, too, that work would be good for the girl. It would give her something to think about besides her troubles. Another thing, and Jerico admitted it frankly, the release of Doughgod from kitchen duties would be a help. It would give him another man and Doughgod was a tough old warrior. Jerico held out his broad, calloused hand to the girl.

"Shake hands, pardner," he said. "You can help a heap."

That afternoon Lon Dennis came in and with his advent Jerico set about the fulfillment of certain plans he had made. He sent Pat, Nig, and the Swede out with Lon to ride south and east. They were to learn the country as they rode, and incidentally throw what Long L steers they could, toward the north. To Marty and Blake Wade Jerico gave other orders. They were to throw the gathered Long L steers into a compact bunch and push them south along the road.

"Go about five miles," directed Jerico. "Drift 'em an' then hold 'em. Don't let 'em work back north."

Marty grinned at the orders. "Just day herd 'em in Sturgis' front yard," he interpreted. "Sure thing!"

Jerico's grin was sardonic. "You must think Sturgis has a hell of a big front yard," he said. "You start them steers!"

"What about tonight?" asked Marty.

"Come in about dark," directed Jerico. "If this bunch is scattered we know where there's plenty more. You an' Blake stay close together an' if anybody comes ridin' up to you, stop him far enough off so that you can watch him."

"Hostile?" questioned Marty.

Jerico shook his head. "Not hostile," he answered, "just watchful."

Marty grunted, nodded his acknowledgment, and went to the corral.

NEBRASKA and Doughgod had already brought in a bunch of Seven M horses to add to the remuda that the Long L had brought from the camp. Jerico went out and looked the bunch over. He singled out the bay gelding that Bob Macklin had ridden the day he was killed. It would be fitting and proper to finish breaking that horse. Nebraska came over and joined Jerico.

"Get you a horse, Nebraska," directed Jerico. "You an' me are goin' visitin'."

"Sturgis?" questioned Nebraska.

Jerico shook his head. "Over west," he said. "We got some neighbors. We'll leave Doughgod here to hold down the place."

Nebraska nodded and Jerico went to the house to give Doughgod his orders. Polly Macklin was in the kitchen with the old cook. She listened while Jerico talked and when he left the room she dried her hands and hurried out. Before Jerico and Nebraska had saddled the girl appeared at the corral and stated her intention of going along.

"I know all the people west of us," she informed Jerico. "I'm going to ride with you."

Jerico, seeing the advantage that the girl's presence would give, nodded his head in agreement.

The three rode west. In the course of the afternoon they visited two ranches, Pedersen's Bar K and Allen's Circle A. At Pedersen's they found the owner, Ales Pedersen at home and visited for a time. At the Circle A they were informed that Allen, Senior, had gone in to town, but they talked with young Leonard Allen who was in the corral doctoring a horse. When the three had ridden back into the Seven M yard, unsaddled, and turned their horses through the corral into the pasture, Jerico felt that the trip had definitely been worth while.

Pat, Nig, the Swede, and Lon Dennis came in shortly after Jerico and his companions arrived. They reported throwing quite a number of Long L steers toward the north, and both Nig and Swede seemed to have familiarized themselves fairly well with the country. Later, after the others had eaten supper, Marty Rafferty and Blake Wade arrived. They had seen no one, had not been molested, and they had left the gathered steers about five miles south. With horses penned in the corral for use should occasion arise, Jerico and his men repaired to the bunkhouse. Only Doughgod and Pat Fallon stayed at the house. Doughgod, unable to sever his connection with a cookstove, was washing dishes, and wonder of wonders, Pat Fallon had stayed to help him. Jerico and the rest sat around the bunkhouse smoking and talking. Presently Doughgod joined them but they were all ready to turn in before Pat Fallon came down from the ranch house and opened his bed. When he had blown out the lamp and was ready to turn in on his borrowed bedding, Jerico grinned to himself. He knew sign, did Jerico Jones.

In the morning after breakfast, Jerico sent Blake and Nig to day herd the gathered steers, and started Marty and Swede out to cover the country Swede had been over the day before. He himself, Nebraska and Pat went with Lon Dennis to work on farther south. In that manner Jerico felt all the men could familiarize themselves with the country. Doughgod was left as a profane home guard and Polly Macklin busied herself in the kitchen, declaring that she was going to bake bread.

THE day passed uneventfully, as did succeeding days. A sense of false security settled around the Long L lease. Pat Fallon was a frequent and apparently welcome visitor at the ranch house. The riders, in their work, encountered men from the Bar S but these circled wide. Whitaker came out from town, remained

for a meal and went back again. Apparently everything was peaceful. Still Jerico kept his men riding in pairs and waited watchfully. The little bunch of Long L steers that had been gathered augmented now by perhaps fifty head, were grazed farther and farther south. It was only a question of time, Jerico knew, and so he waited, content to let Sturgis make the next move.

That move came suddenly. At noon, a week after the lease had been signed, a little group of riders came from the west, rode into the Seven M yard and dismounting, walked toward the house. Jerico came from the bunkhouse to meet them.

There were four men: Walrus-mustached Ales Pedersen and young Leonard Allen were in the group, together with two others Jerico did not know. It was Pedersen who did the talking and with his first words Jerico saw that Sturgis had been at work.

"We come over to see what you figger to do, Jones," growled Pedersen.

"Do about what?" Jerico was calm.

"You know what!" Pedersen was angry. "You got a thousand head of steers in this country."

Jerico nodded. "That's the figure," he agreed.

"You ain't got enough grass leased to run 'em."

"I got two thousand acres leased an' the water controls about eight thousand more." Jerico spoke reasonably.

Pedersen shook his head. "We come over to warn you," he said bluntly. "Don't throw them steers on our grass!"

"Who sent you over?" Jerico was equally blunt.

"Nobody sent us!" Pedersen's face was red. "We——"

"I don't bluff worth a cent, Pedersen," remarked Jerico. "My steers ain't been on yore grass. They're east of here an' you know it. I'll tell you somethin'; the Seven M has been runnin' a little bunch an' holdin' 'em close. You been usin' grass that belongs to the Seven M by custom, but that's all right. We ain't kickin'. All we want is our share."

"An' we come to tell you to stay off of ours." Pedersen was stubborn.

"An' we've stayed off," agreed Jerico. "Go talk to Sturgis. The Bar S owns five thousand acres an' runs ten thousand cows. If yo're lookin' for a grass hog go talk to Sturgis!"

One of the men that Jerico did not know spoke quietly. "There's been Long L steers usin' in my country," he said evenly.

Jerico looked at the speaker. "Where abouts?" he demanded.

"I'm Allen of the Circle A, west of you," said the speaker. "My boy Leonard said you was over to our place but I missed yuh."

"Throw 'em east when you find 'em," Jerico parried. "That's yore riders' business."

Allen was adamant. "You got no business havin' cattle west," he said shaking his head.

Jerico thought swiftly for a moment. He could readily see how there were Long L

steers toward the west. Bar S riders had picked up little bunches and drifted them into Circle A and Bar K Bar range. Sturgis was smart.

"I'll put riders west," offered Jerico. "We can come to some agreement on a line an' I'll hold my stuff east of it."

"I hear you got more steers comin'," went on Pedersen, taking up the talk again. "We're servin' notice on you, Jones, not to hog our grass. Winter's comin' an' it'll be hard to carry our stuff through the way it is."

Jerico disregarded Pedersen and spoke to Allen again. "How about that proposition?" he queried.

Allen nodded thoughtfully. "I'll think it over," he answered.

Pedersen turned to his companion. "Think, hell!" he blared. "You know damn' good an' well, Allen, that you can't do it. You know——"

JERICO turned wearily. "I'll work with a man when I can, Pedersen," he said. "I ain't tryin' to stir up trouble. I've made Allen a fair offer. Suppose you keep your yap out of it!"

Pedersen lost his head. "This is my business as much as anybody's!" he flared. "You keep yore damn' cattle east of the railroad or I'll——"

JERICO took a swift step. His eyes were glinting and he thrust his granite hard face squarely into Pedersen's. Conciliation had failed; it was time to be salty. "You'll go back to Sturgis an' tell him I don't bluff!" he snapped. "You pore damn' fool, pullin' Sturgis' chestnuts out for him! This is open range. I'll follow custom as long as I'm let, but I won't scare. Git out, now!"

Pedersen backed up a step. The elder Allen was frowning. Jerico saw that he had lost ground. He turned to Allen. "You set the line," he said mildly. "I'll try to keep the Long L east of it. That all right?"

Allen pondered a moment. "I'll think it over," he said ungraciously. "Come on, Ales. Yo're gettin' mad."

Pedersen was fuming. Allen and young Leonard Allen pushed themselves between Pedersen and Jerico. Jerico waited a moment and then turned and walked back toward the bunkhouse. By the time he had reached it the four men had mounted and were riding west. Jerico shook his head. He was worried. He had known this was coming but it bothered him nevertheless. Jerico was intrinsically fair. He wanted very much to hurt Sturgis but he didn't want to harm the other ranchmen. He shook his head. You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. Jerico knew that he was bound to encroach on grass that the Bar K Bar and the Circle A considered theirs. He was sitting on a bunk, thinking it over when Pat Fallon came in.

"What'd them fellows want?" demanded Pat.

Jerico told him. Pat thought it over a moment and then shrugged.

"Somebody'll get hurt," he prophesied. "It's tough, but in the long run it'll be better for them to have Frank Larey for a neighbor than Sturgis."

"Mebbe," Jerico said doubtfully.

"I'm goin' in to town," Pat announced. "We're about out of grub an' I want to see Whitaker. I got to wire Larey, too. We need some cash an' I want to know when them other steers are comin'."

"Hell!" Jerico got up, moved nervously and wheeled on Pat. "This is a damned fool thing. I wish——"

"Are them fellows any worse off with us runnin' them Chihuahuas than they would of been with Sturgis buyin' 'em?" asked Pat.

Jerico's face brightened. "I reckon not," he agreed.

"You ride over east an' look things over." Pat put his hand on the older man's shoulder. "Quit worryin' about bein' fair. It'll all come out in the wash. I know Frank Larey. He'll do what's right."

"I reckon so," Jerico agreed grudgingly.

"Sturgis is just usin' them fellows." Pat removed his hand and turned toward the door. "Just keep rockin', Jerico."

Jerico nodded and Pat went on out. Presently Jerico, too, left the bunkhouse. Pat's suggestion had been good. He would ride over and take a look at the country east. Pat was in the corral hitching a team. Polly Macklin, dressed and ready for the ride to town, was standing beside the corral watching Pat. Jerico's face lost its grim expression. He had noticed that Polly no longer called Pat "Mister Fallon." It was "Pat" now. A hopeful sign. Pat hooked the team to the wagon and helped

the girl to the seat, then he climbed up beside her and took the lines. Polly waved to Doughgod who stood in the kitchen door. The wagon rattled out of the yard and Jerico went on to the corral for a mount.

THE chunky bay horse that Bob Macklin had started, was in the corral. Jerico roped the bay and saddled. The gelding was by way of making a fair horse. He rode east from the Seven M, not paying much attention to where he was going, just letting the bay get along. There were a number of things on Jerico's mind. He knew that the visit from Pedersen and Allen was a move on Sturgis' part. That was plain enough, and smart, too, Jerico could see that. He couldn't understand, however, why he had not had a warrant served on him for the killing of Bob Macklin. That should have been Sturgis' move. Sturgis evidently controlled the deputy sheriff and probably had plenty of drag with the sheriff's and prosecutor's offices. The fact that no warrant had been issued bothered Jerico.

Too, the continued close herding of the little bunch of steers on Sturgis' grass was not bringing the results that Jerico had counted on. He had thought that Sturgis would make some attempt to move those cattle. They were on public domain. Jerico had reasoned that if Sturgis ran the bunch, or tried to intimidate the men holding them, the Long L could, with some lawfulness, protect themselves. Sturgis was clever. Too clever. There was something missing, some particular plan that Sturgis was formulating. Jerico wondered what it was. Sturgis had to make the first move; when he did Jerico would go to bat. He knew that Sturgis was a crook and a killer. A man that would sit his horse beside a corral and talk to a boy while a killer lined rifle sights on the boy's head, was too low a thing to be called a man. The very thought of Sturgis set the blood to ringing in Jerico's ears. The man needed killing. Jerico raised his head and saw that he was well away from the Seven M. He shrugged —better forget Sturgis for the present and attend to business. He was to look for Long L steers, not worry about Sturgis.

He proceeded about that business. Working west and south he inspected bunch after bunch of cattle. Judging from the brand the cattle wore, he was on Bar K Bar range. There were not many of them and looking for Long L's was like searching for four leaf clovers in a cow pasture. Jerico swung over the top of a ridge.

He paused a moment at the top, scanning the country. The ridge below him benched off and then dropped again. There were cedars on the bench and clusters of granite boulders. There was a movement in one of the boulder clumps. A horse was in there. Jerico leaned forward.

The horse moved again. Jerico dropped down from the bay as though he had been shot. He knew that horse in the boulder clump. It was Stranger, his own gray that had disappeared at the time the cattle were run off.

There was a clump of cedars perhaps twenty feet to Jerico's left. He pulled the reluctant bay to the shelter, tied it and then, bending low, worked his way forward. At the front of the bunch of cedars he paused.

He could see Stranger well. The horse was saddled and tied. Jerico searched the country to right and left of the boulders. What was Stranger doing here? Where was Stranger's rider? Jerico wished that he knew. It was evident that he had not been seen when he came over the ridge. If he had, one of two things would have happened: either a shot would have whistled at him or Stranger's rider would have appeared. Who had the horse? Why? Jerico chose a knotted cedar tree and worked toward it.

FROM cover to cover, noiseless, careful, taking infinite pains, Jerico worked toward the gray horse. A rock tinkled under his foot and he crouched for five minutes waiting to see what the sound brought. Nothing happened.

He reached the boulders where the horse was tied. Stranger, ears erect, watched nervously. Jerico dared not speak to quiet the horse. He worked through the boulders, slowly, patiently. Over to his right came the clink of metal. Jerico slid around a rock. Just below him he could see a man sprawled at full length, a rifle extended between rocks, and down below, on the flat under the bench, a rider drove three cows toward a little pole corral. Jerico slid his gun from under his coat. The sprawling man with the rifle was Webb Greves.

He watched the rider on the flat, pen the cows and dismount to close the corral gate. The rider was Ales Pedersen. Jerico recognized the sweeping mustache. Pedersen, the gate closed, paused to load and light a pipe. He stood by the corral, motionless, a perfect target. Greves was lifting the rifle, carefully lining the sights.

Jerico raised his own gun. "Hold it, Greves!" he said gently. "Yo're covered!"

Webb Greves turned his head. His light blue eyes blinked in his sunburned face. Jerico read those eyes.

"There's not a chance, Greves," he said. "Don't try it. Put yore gun down!"

Greves lowered the rifle and put his hands under him, ready to stand up. Again Jerico issued orders.

"Lay real still. Push yore hands out ahead of you!"

Greves obeyed.

Without taking his eyes from Greves, Jerico lifted his voice.

"Pedersen, Pedersen, come up here!" he called.

There was a hoarse answer from below. Rocks clattered. A horse was coming up the hill. A bit of yellow paper, just the edge, showed from below Greves' leg. The approaching horse stopped, breathing heavily. Jerico risked a swift look. Ales Pedersen, atop his big black, was looking at Greves. Pedersen lifted his eyes and looked swiftly at Jerico.

"What the hell?" boomed Pedersen.

"Saw his horse," said Jerico swiftly. "I was lookin' for Long L stuff. Worked over here an' found him lyin' in the rocks. His sights was lined on you, Pedersen."

"You lie!" Greves cried, trying, hoarsely, to defend himself. "I was——"

"My horse is back by the ridge," interrupted Jerico. "You can see where I come down. His horse is in the rocks. Believe what you see, Pedersen?"

"You dirty killer!" Pedersen could scarcely speak.

"Stand up, Greves!" commanded Jerico. "Easy."

Greves got up, moving carefully. Jerico risked another glance at Pedersen. The big man had his gun out. It was pointing at Greves. The square of yellow paper that had been under Greves' leg was exposed. It looked like a telegram.

"Why?" blurted Pedersen. "Me an' the Bar S have always been friendly."

"Friends don't figure," answered Jerico. "Stand away, Greves. Watch him, Pedersen." Greves moved. Pedersen held his gun on the sunburned man. Jerico took three swift steps, stooped and picked up the paper. It was a telegram blank. The name, Jerico Jones, was on the address line.

"Goin' to plant it on me," said Jerico in a monotone. "Here's why, Pedersen."

THE hammer of Pedersen's big Colt clicked suddenly, three times, as Pedersen's big thumb brought it back. "Damn you Greves!" shouted Pedersen.

"Hold it!" snapped Jerico. "Don't you, Pedersen!"

"He's a dirty killer!" A tinge of insanity in Pedersen's voice. "I'm goin' to kill him! Lyin' there——"

"We'll tie him up," directed Jerico. "Get yore rope!"

PEDERSEN moved. Jerico went slowly toward Greves. The man was as dangerous as a mad rattlesnake. Jerico twitched Greves' Colt from its holster, dropped it, and stepped back swiftly. He was easier now. Pedersen had a length of short rope, a pigging string, in his left hand. He advanced toward Greves.

"You can't do this!" Greves' voice was hoarse. "By God, Sturgis will——"

Pedersen's gun flashed up and then down. It thudded dully against Greves' hat. The man sprawled forward, falling. Pedersen's black horse snorted and jumped at the sudden movement. Pedersen, his gun raised, was stooping. He intended, movement and position showed it, to beat the life from Webb Greves.

"Stop it!" snapped Jerico.

Pedersen checked, stared at Jerico, madness in his eyes. Jerico's gun covered the big man.

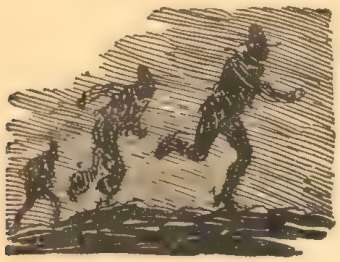
"I want him alive," rasped Jerico. "Tie him!"

Sanity fought the madness in Pedersen's eyes, fought the battle and won. Jerico, watching, nodded his approbation.

"That's it," he commended. "Put up yore gun an' tie him."

As though in a daze Pedersen slowly holstered his gun, pulled Greves' arms behind his back, and began to work with the pigging string.

Jerico returned his own gun to the clip holster under his arm. He watched while



Pedersen pulled the knots tight on the wrists and bound a loop about Greves' feet. Pedersen jerked viciously, pulling the knot tight, looked at his handiwork a moment and then stood up. He stared at Jerico who was reading the telegram. It was from Frank Larey at Marfa. Larey was getting a shipment of cattle ready. Jerico lifted his eyes and looked at Pedersen.

"You an' me talked this mornin'," he said gravely. "You might say we quarreled. If you was found dead down at that corral an' this telegram was found up here, what would of happened?"

Pedersen's eyes were completely sane now. "You'd of been hung," he said. "They'd of come in a bunch for you."

Jerico nodded. "That's what was planned," he agreed dryly. "No trial or nothin', just a hangin'. I'd of been out of the way an' there'd of been another place, yore place, for Sturgis to gobble up!"

Anger flashed across Pedersen's face. "What you goin' to do?" he demanded. "You goin' to let this feller go?"

"No." Jerico shook his head. "He's tried to bushwhack you. He's a killer. He's a damn' horse thief, too. That's my horse he's got in the rocks. What do you do to killers an' horse thieves up here?"

Greves was moving. He had recovered from the blow on the head. He stired uneasily.

"Hang 'em," said Pedersen. "I'll go to Niroba an' get Touhy."

"No!" Jerico snarled the word. "Touhy is a Sturgis man."

"He ain't!" flared Pedersen. "Sturgis fired him."

"We don't want no deputies in this," said Jerico. "If you want to get somebody, get Allen an' yore neighbors. We'll take this killer to the Seven M. I reckon you know what'll happen there."

Pedersen was reluctant to obey Jerico. He wanted to turn Greves over to the law. Jerico was obdurate. He knew that Webb Greves held the key to the killing of Bob Macklin. He planned to make Greves give up that key.

"Sturgis can have Greves out in an hour," he said contemptuously. "Help me load him on a horse. Is this country soft? Do you want to let Greves go? Can you fight Sturgis' money?"

JERICO had his way. He brought the gray Stranger from the boulder and together he and Pedersen heaved the bound man up on the horse and lashed him across the saddle. Jerico retrieved his bay and gave Pedersen orders.

"Get Allen," he directed. "Get as many more as you can. Bring 'em to the ranch.

Hell, man! Bond Sturgis is behind this. Greves is just his killer. You think Sturgis is goin' to sit an' take it?"

Pedersen unwillingly convinced, agreed. He mounted the black horse and for a long moment stared at the bound Greves and then at Jerico. He was still a little suspicious of Jerico. Jerico read that suspicion.

"He'll be at the ranch when you get there, Pedersen," Jerico assured him. "I won't kill him an' I won't let him get away."

"I still think we ought to get the deputy," grumbled Pedersen.

"Get him then!" snapped Jerico. "Send word for him to come out. But you get Allen an' come to the ranch first. Go on!"

Pedersen, partially satisfied, turned the black and rode down the slope from the bench, looking back over his shoulder. Jerico, starting Stranger ahead of him, rode east. The sun was just touching the tops of the hills in the west.

At the Seven M the crew was in. Marty, Nig Bell, even Doughgod, saw Jerico coming. They ran out to meet him. Jerico gave few explanations. Briefly he told what had happened. Marty and Nig pulled Greves from Stranger, hauled him to the bunkhouse. Pat Fallon pulled Jerico aside. Polly Macklin, face gray, was watching the men who dragged the inert figure.

"You can't do it, Jerico," said Pat. "Polly's here. You can't take Greves out an' hang him on this place. She'd never get over it."

"Hell!" rasped Jerico. "We ain't goin' to hang him. I want him to talk. He killed Bob Macklin. He's under Sturgis. Scare him enough an' he'll come across."

Pat's face was relieved. "I'll tell Polly," he said.

"What's the matter with yore face?" rasped Jerico. "What happened to you?"

Pat's hand went up to a bruise on his cheek. "Sturgis," he said succinctly. "I seen him in town. I got to tell Polly, Jerico."

"Go tell her then!" barked Jerico. "Tell her that Pedersen an' Allen an' mebbe some more are comin'. Tell her we sent for Touhy. Then come back here. I want to talk to you."

Pat hurried over to the girl, and Jerico stalked to the bunkhouse. Marty Rafferty and Nig Bell had stretched Greves out on a bunk. The man was still tied, hard and fast. Nebraska, a coil of rope in his hands, was sitting where Greves' eyes could watch his fingers. Nebraska was looping the rope, taking turns about it. Lon Dennis stood in a corner of the room. Blake Wade, his face white, was watching Nebraska. Doughgod, standing beside the old puncher, was giving advice.

"No need to take all that trouble, Nebraska," chided Doughgod. "This ain't no formal hangin'. Just tie a loop an' let him strangle."

Jerico stalked over and stood looking down at Greves. "Got anything to say?" he asked.

Greves shook his head. Jerico turned. "We'll wait for Pedersen an' Allen," he informed the men. Nebraska went on with his knot tying. Greves' eyes followed Nebraska's fingers, fascinated.

DOUGHGOD cleared his throat. "I remember one time we hung a man," he recounted. "Took him damn' near thirty minutes to die. Look, Nebraska. If you tie that a little tighter it'll slip down slow. Let him strangle a little at a time. Give it here; I'll show yuh."

Nebraska pushed Doughgod's hand aside. "Lemme alone," he snarled. "I know how to do this." He got up, stalked over, rope in hand, pulled Webb Greves' head up from the bed and slid the looped rope around his neck. At the touch of the rope Greves flinched away. His pale eyes filled suddenly with fright. His voice was a squawk.

"My God, boys! Don't do that!"

Nebraska slid the rope down snug on Greves' scrawny throat, twisted it until the knot was under Greves' ear.

"When in hell will those fellows be here?" demanded Nebraska.

Greves struggled against his bonds, threshed on the bunk. Horses tramped in the yard. Pedersen's bull voice boomed.

"Jones!"

Jerico hastened to the bunkhouse door. Pedersen, followed by Allen, appeared in the light of the doorway. It was almost full dark outside.

"In here," directed Jerico. "We're about ready to go ahead."

"We sent for——" began Pedersen.

Greves, nerve broken, babbled on the bunk. "Sturgis! It was Sturgis'——"

Jerico almost ran to the man's side. "Talk up," snapped Jerico. "Talk to save yore life, man!"

Pedersen was behind Jerico now, peering over his shoulder. At the sight of the man, Greves broke completely. His fright was so great that his words were almost incoherent, but he told enough of a story so that the rest could be pieced out. Sturgis had ordered Greves to kill Pedersen. The telegram from Frank Larey had been filched from the depot office. Jerico, grim faced, turned to stare at Pedersen, and the big rancher nodded.

"What about Bob Macklin?" rasped Jerico. "You killed him. You was at the corner of the barn an' shot him with a rifle. Tell the truth, Greves."

Greves shook his head. His mouth settled into grim, stubborn lines. Jerico whirled and grated a command. "Take him out, Nebraska!"

Nebraska Williams pulled on the rope about Greves' throat. It tightened perceptibly. Greves struggled, gasped, and gave up.

"I shot Macklin," he panted. "Sturgis ——"

Nebraska let go the rope. Jerico straightened. "I reckon that'll do," announced Jerico. "Take off the rope, Nebraska. The sheriff'll be out here pretty quick. Take off the rope."

"You ain't goin' to hang him?" demanded the incredulous Nebraska.

"Not now," agreed Jerico.

Doughgod said, "Hell!" disgustedly. Pat Fallon heaved a sigh of relief.

"He's worth more alive an' talkin' than he would be dead," Jerico said flatly. "Pull off that rope."

Unwillingly Nebraska jerked the rope from Greves' neck. He looked at the knot, grunted, and flipped the rope down to the floor.

"All that work!" remarked Nebraska, and spat at the rope.

"We'll go to the house," Jerico stated. "Lon, you an' Marty stay here an' watch this fellow. Come on!"

Jerico turned and walked toward the door, Pat following him. Allen and Pedersen trailed out. Doughgod, Nig Bell, and Wade Blake followed Pedersen.

"You might make us some coffee, Doughgod," suggested Jerico over his shoulder. "Some of us ain't had supper."

"I'll be damned," grunted Doughgod, and broke into a trot toward the kitchen.

Pat came up and joined Jerico. They walked in silence for perhaps five steps. Behind them Allen and Pedersen were talking. Jerico heard Pedersen say, "Sturgis!" and curse luridly.

"What happened in town, Pat?" asked Jerico.

"I seen him," growled Pat Fallon. "He made me a proposition."

"What was it, Pat?"

"Said that he wouldn't swear out a warrant for you on the Macklin killin' if we'd sell him the steers an' this lease we got."

"Huh!" grunted Jerico.

"The nerve of that fellow," said Pat softly.

"Yeah?" encouraged Jerico.

"I told him to go to hell," Pat continued. "He got to talkin', hintin' around about Polly. I slapped his face an' he hit me. Then I knocked him down."

JERICO stared at his companion. They were in the light from the kitchen door. Pots and pans rattled inside the kitchen where Doughgod was busy. Pat flushed under Jerico's scrutiny. "Polly was with

me or I'd of killed him," said Pat flatly.

Jerico nodded. "Like her, Pat?" he asked.

The dull red on Pat's cheeks deepened. Jerico had his answer.

"What did Whitaker say?" demanded Jerico.

"He's got 'em all tied up," answered Pat. "He's paid the interest on the mortgage an' he got an injunction against Sturgis. I don't know what all he ain't done. He wants you to come in an' see him."

Pedersen and Allen joined the two by the door. Doughgod poked his head out. "I'm warmin' up some grub," offered Doughgod. "You all better come in an' eat a bite."

"Come in, men," invited Jerico.

They went into the kitchen. Polly Macklin, her face pale but her eyes alive and light, was at the table setting places. Jerico, Allen and Pedersen went to the table. They sat down.

Allen leaned forward. "I sent Leonard for Touhy," he said. "He ought to be here any time now. What do you think, Jones?"

"I think that Sturgis is all through," answered Jerico thoughtfully. "With Greves testifyin' against him, Sturgis is done. Greves will tell a plenty. He's got to to save his life."

"We ought to hung him." Doughgod set a platter of meat before Jerico.

Sharp and distinct a shot roared in the night. The men at the table started up, exclamations on their lips. Nebraska and Nig Bell ran to the kitchen door, met in it and wedged. There was confusion for a moment.

Nebraska got clear. He ran out. Nig almost fell down the steps. The men boiled out of the kitchen, running toward the bunkhouse. They thrust open the door, pushed inside and stopped. Marty Rafferty, head bleeding from a long gash, lay on the floor unconscious, and on the bunk Webb Greves was stretched out, still bound, blood oozing out on his shirt.

It was Jerico who recovered first. He half turned and stared at Pat Fallon. "Dennis!" said Jerico. "He was workin' for Sturgis all the time!"

The men filed out of the bunkhouse. Doughgod and Nebraska stayed to administer what aid they could to Rafferty. Greves was dead.

A SEARCH about the place revealed that there were no horses in the corral. Allen's horse and Pedersen's black also were gone, turned loose. When the men returned to the bunkhouse from their futile search, Marty Rafferty was conscious and talking. He had been watching Greves. He had heard Dennis move behind him, had turned to speak to him and that was all he remembered.

Jerico swore softly at Marty's report. "Hit Marty," he said. "Went an' turned loose the horses. Got himself a mount an' then come back here an' killed Greves. Damn me, I should of knowed!"

"It ain't yore fault, Jerico," Pat said. "We'll light out an'——"

"We're afoot," said Jerico bluntly. "He's headed for Sturgis on a run. Sturgis will know all about what's happened! Damn it!"

"But what can Sturgis do?" questioned Allen. "Pedersen an' me heard what Greves said. We know who's behind the trouble."

"Sturgis has got mebbe twenty-five men," interrupted Jerico. "He can do a plenty."

"What's goin' on here?" demanded a voice. The men in the bunkhouse turned to see Lance Touhy in the doorway with Leonard Allen looking in over his shoulder. The deputy sheriff strode on into the room.

"What's goin' on?" he demanded again.

THERE was a babble of voices as all the men tried to talk at once. Gradually out of the turmoil, order was restored. Pedersen and Allen, now separately, now talking together, told Touhy what had happened. The deputy asked questions. He examined Greves and heard Marty

Rafferty's story. He listened, learned, and when he had the facts, faced Jerico.

"It's damn' lucky for you that some of this happened, Jones," said Touhy bluntly. "I got a warrant in my coat for you, accusin' you of killin' Bob Macklin."

"Goin' to serve it?" Jerico grinned wryly.

Touhy shook his head. "What do you want to do?" he demanded.

Jerico looked around the room. The temper of the men was in their eyes. Again Jerico stared at the deputy. "You might get a posse here," he said slowly.

"Well?" questioned Touhy.

"Mebbe you want to arrest Dennis for killin' Webb Greves," Jerico's voice was casual. "Mebbe you want Sturgis in the Macklin killin'."

"Of course I want 'em." Touhy's voice was brusque. "I ain't goin' to go up

against an army though. Sturgis will have all his punchers."

Jerico interrupted. "Me," he drawled, "I been plannin' to ride in to Niroba an' talk to Sturgis. So Pat?"

Pat Fallon's hazel eyes were bright. "Sure," he agreed.

Over by Webb Greves' body Marty Rafferty voiced the opinion of the Texas men. "Gun talk!" grunted Marty.

"Yo're crazy!" snapped Touhy. "Sturgis will be waitin' for you. You think he's goin' to be sittin' back holdin' his hands? There's half a dozen places between here an' town where he can lay for you an' blast you to hell. The thing for us to do is get hold of the sheriff. Get him over here with a bunch of deputies an'——"

"Go kiss Sturgis?" completed Pat Fallon.

"Hell!" Touhy lost his temper.

Jerico took charge. "We're goin' to town, Touhy," he said. "Either we'll go as yore deputies or we'll go without that, but we're goin'. We'll leave here by daybreak. Nobody's goin' to waylay us or dry gulch us. Not this bunch. We'll arrest Sturgis. Mebbe we'll take a few more into camp. What in hell do you want to do, Touhy? Call out the cavalry?"

Touhy gave up. He snorted disgustedly, glanced around and spat on the floor. "Raise yore right hands," he ordered. "I'll swear you in!"

The men in the bunkhouse mumbled words after the deputy, lowered their hands and instinctively looked to Jerico for orders. Jerico would have deferred to Touhy but the deputy sheriff would have none of that.

"Yo're the boss," he said to Jerico. "You can ramrod this madhouse."

Accordingly Jerico issued orders. There was no use in moving before daylight. Young Leonard Allen and Touhy were to run in a bunch of horses before daybreak. They were the only mounted men in the bunch. Guards were posted, Jerico wisely taking precautions against a surprise blow by Sturgis. This was war, range war, and Jerico realized it. Doughgod he dispatched to the kitchen to reheat the meal. Pat Fallon he sent to the house to reassure Polly Macklin. Jerico was worried about the girl; he would have to leave someone at the place to look after her, lose a man from his fighting force. Greves was carried outside and deposited in a root cellar. Jerico ordered the rest to bed.

That was one order that was not well obeyed. The men were excited. They wanted to talk, did talk. Allen and Pedersen, catching the spirit of the Long L men, wanted to get horses and ride to outlying ranches for recruits. This Jerico forbade.

"No use gettin' the whole country into this," he said. "Besides we only got two horses up on the place. It'ud take a couple

of hours to find the remuda tonight. Better turn in."

Gradually the Seven M quieted down. Nig Bell and Swede Hanson, weary and taking Jerico at his word, stretched out on bunks. The lamp in the bunkhouse was blown out. Doughgod, having fed Jerico, Allen and Pedersen, put his kitchen to rights and turned in. Standing by the bunkhouse door Jerico could see Pat Fallon's cigarette glow on the porch of the ranch house. Pat was talking to Polly Macklin. Jerico grinned grimly. He could just about guess what Pat was saying. He would have to look out for Pat tomorrow, keep him back. Jerico squatted by the bunkhouse wall, waiting, waiting. Maybe tomorrow—Jerico pushed the thought away. There had been more than one night such as this in his life. A man can't spend eight years in the Ranger force without having trouble. Still—Jerico shrugged and fumbled in his vest for papers and tobacco. He heard Pat Fallon's feet as the lad came to the bunkhouse. A good boy, Pat Fallon.

MORNING broke. The sleepless Jerico wakened Leonard Allen and Nig Bell, sent them out after the horses. Doughgod's alarm clock went off with a bang and rattle. The old cook stifled it, stretched, yawned, and got up. Smoke came from the chimney of the ranch kitchen. Men began to stir. The guards came in, Marty and Nebraska.

Breakfast was ready before the horses were run in. The men ate silently. Leonard Allen and Nig came up from the corral and announced that the horses were penned.

Touhy came to Jerico. "You still bent on this, Jones?" he asked.

"Might as well get it over with," assented Jerico. "Mebbe Sturgis will just come along peaceful."

"You don't know Sturgis," grated Touhy.

"I aim to know him better," drawled Jerico.

Touhy walked away. His load was heavy on his shoulders. He was responsible even though Jerico was the boss. Jerico liked the deputy. Touhy was a good man. He wanted to do what was right. His trouble was that he couldn't decide what was right and what was wrong. Jerico shrugged. He walked over the corral, spoke to Allen.

"Better leave yore kid here," suggested Jerico.

Allen looked relieved. "You can stay with him if you want to," Jerico told him.

Allen shook his head, his face darkening. "I'm goin'," he stated.

"Tell yore boy." Jerico turned away. "I got to leave somebody else here, too. Somebody older. They might break back on us an' come down on this place."

"Leave yore cook," suggested Allen.

"Doughgod?" Jerico grinned. "That old heller will be right up in front. We'd have to fight to get away if we tried to leave him."

Pat Fallon, a rope in his hand, came from the bunkhouse toward the corral. Jerico hastened his stride and intercepted Pat before the hazel eyed boy reached his goal.

"Better put yore rope up, Pat," said Jerico. "I'm goin' to leave you here with Polly."

Pat shook his head. "You don't leave me," he snapped. "Send Polly over to Allen's with the kid."

It was an idea. Jerico nodded slowly. "I'll do that," he said. "You go tell her. We'll see her start."

Pat, rope in hand, hastened toward the house.

The Long L men were in the corral roping out their mounts. There was no laughter and very little talk. This was a roundup day all right but it was a grim, forbidding roundup. Pat came back to the corral, went through the gate and selecting a horse, roped the animal. Jerico watched while Pat put Polly Macklin's saddle on the horse. Young Leonard Allen, tears that he tried to keep back, in his

eyes, came to Jerico and pleaded to be taken along. Jerico was adamant. Pat roped out a horse for himself and another for Jerico. Jerico left the disappointed Leonard Allen and got his own saddle. Polly Macklin, dressed and ready, came from the house. The Long L men stopped their preparations long enough to see her ride away westward with Leonard Allen, then when the two were gone Jerico finished his saddling and looked about him. The men were ready. Jerico mounted.

The little body of horsemen rode south. Ahead of them Nig Bell and Marty Rafferty rode the ridges. Behind them smoke rose from the chimney of the deserted Seven M.

Pat Fallon, riding beside Jerico, looked back over his shoulder.

"Look ahead, Pat," ordered Jerico gruffly. "You'll see the place when you ride in this evenin'."

Pat grunted.

They circled wide of the Bar S buildings. The place looked deserted. There was no smoke and no movement. The Bar S was not at home.

NEAR the outskirts of Niroba, Jerico, watching Marty Rafferty, saw the Long L man rein in. Jerico, Pat beside him, spurred ahead. The others spread out in a thin line. Nig Bell was riding toward Rafferty. Another man appeared, riding out from the direction of town. It was Whitaker, the lawyer. The five, Bell, Marty, Jerico, Pat and the lawyer, met, reined in and stopped. Whitaker looked at the men he confronted. He glanced past them and saw the others coming on: Allen, Nebraska, Doughgod, Pedersen, Blake Wade and Touhy. Whitaker's mouth was a thin, hard line.

"So you come to town?" he said between his tight lips. "Well, they're waiting for you."

"Where?" demanded Pat.

"In the Stag," answered Whitaker. "Sturgis and every man he could muster."

"It's good they're all together," drawled Jerico.

"He's had men watching you," warned Whitaker. "Dennis came in last night with word of what had happened. He said that you killed Webb Greves."

The other men of the posse had ridden up and were grouped about Jerico and Whitaker. Jerico moved his arm in warning.

"Scatter out," he commanded. "Don't bunch up like this." Then to the lawyer, "You seem to know a heap about it, Whitaker."

"I do." Whitaker nodded as the possemen moved to obey Jerico's order. "I've been paying a bartender in the Stag, waiting for a time like this to come."

"An' what else do you know?" queried Jerico.

"I know that two men rode in to town ahead of you," answered Whitaker. "They know you are coming."

Pat Fallon spoke nervously. "Do you reckon they watched the ranch?"

"I know they did," Whitaker answered Pat.

"What about Polly, Jerico?" Pat voiced the reason for his nervousness. "You don't reckon——?"

"We'll ride ahead," said Jerico. "Whitaker, I thank you kindly."

Whitaker turned his horse. The butt of a rifle peeped over the top of his saddle. "I'm going with you," he said precisely. "There are times when the legal profession is not entirely satisfactory."

Jerico suddenly laughed aloud. "Good man," he commended. "Let's pull out. Start ahead Nig, you an' Marty."

The two point men spurred off. The others rode on at a slower gait. There was no particular hurry. They were expected. Sturgis was waiting. Something inexorable in the steady jog of the horses, Jerico turned in his saddle, looking at Whitaker.

"Dennis killed Webb Greves," he said. "Lemme tell you."

Whitaker listened while Jerico related

the happenings of the previous day. From time to time the lawyer nodded.

"And you are all deputies," he asked, when Jerico finished.

"Yeah," said Jerico.

"What do you plan to do?"

"Arrest Sturgis."

Whitaker sniffed. "Easier said than done. He will fight."

"An' so will we," simply.

Whitaker held out his hand. "Give me your tobacco," he requested. "I think I'll smoke a cigarette."

Jerico brought out the makings. The lawyer's thin fingers curled paper about tobacco. "Any plans?" he asked.

"None to speak of." Jerico was frank.

THEY were almost at the outskirts of Niroba. The sun had risen over the Rock Ribs, was sending long slants of light down into the valley. The town stood stark and deserted, heavy shadows on the western sides of the buildings. The men closed in on Jerico, the point riders falling back.

Jerico spoke to Touhy. "Want to take it from here?" he asked, tendering command.

Touhy shook his head.

"We'll ride in," Jerico spoke slowly. "I'm goin' to ride ahead. You all keep back. Watch the houses. Whitaker says they're in the Stag. I don't want nobody to get hurt. Keep covered. Don't shoot unless you have to. I reckon you know when."

He moved his horse ahead, advancing down the street. The others waited until an interval of perhaps a hundred feet intervened and then they too rode ahead. They moved slowly, keeping their horses down to a walk. The houses on either side were dead, deserted apparently. It might have been a ghost town they entered.

Turning left Jerico swung into the main street. Down at the end of the street was the depot. The stores were closed. The trough in front of the blacksmith shop where Jerico had watered Stranger when he first came to town, was just to Jerico's right. He reined in and moved his right arm wide. Behind him the others, interpreting his gesture, stopped. Men slid down from horses, leading their mounts into the recesses between buildings. Jerico looked back, saw that his forces were disposing themselves and then looking forward again sat waiting. From the Stag Saloon, further down the street a man emerged, walked out on the board sidewalk and stood leaning against a pillar that supported the porch roof in front of the saloon. It was Sturgis.

Jerico put a little pressure on his spurs. His horse moved forward. Solitary, Jerico rode toward the waiting Sturgis. Fifty feet from the man he halted.

"We come for you, Sturgis," he said. "Yo're wanted for murder. Greves talked last night before Lon Dennis killed him."

Sturgis' face was flushed. He stared at Jerico. "Why damn you, Jones," he said flatly, "you won't take me!"

"I think I will, Sturgis." Jerico was calm.

Sturgis moved his hand toward the Stag. "I've got the Macklin girl in there," he said. "We were watchin' when you left the Seven M."

There was truth in the man's voice. Jerico's eyes shifted from Sturgis' face. For an instant he was nonplussed. Then he spoke, his voice strong.

"Give up, Sturgis," he said. "We've got you. If you hurt that girl——"

From the Stag a gun crashed. Jerico's sentence was left unfinished. He went down from his horse, falling limp, like a sack of meal sliding from the tail gate of a wagon. The frightened horse reared high. Sturgis, running like a frightened rabbit, leaped for the door of the Stag. From up the street guns answered the shot from the Stag and Jerico Jones, sprawled on his belly lay inert in front of the saloon.

He lay motionless. He dared not move. From the corner of his eyes he had sighted a telltale movement in the saloon door an instant before the shot. He had thrown

himself sidewards and let his body go limp. The lead had breathed against his cheek but had done no harm. The horse was gone. Jerico lay there, right arm under his body, eyes opened a crack, watching the front of the Stag.

HE HEARD Pat Fallon call to him. Dared not answer. He knew that if he moved, a second and better placed shot would come to finish him. The men in the saloon were keeping up a constant firing. From the outside, the possemen answered that fire. A ring of steel and lead surrounded the Stag Saloon.

Save only in front. Jerico suddenly realized that there was no lead going over him. There was, he remembered, a vacant lot directly opposite the Stag. No place for a man to take cover. The attackers were firing at the Stag's front from an angle.

From up the street, in the direction from which they had come, Jerico heard the

pound of hoofs. He widened his eyes, risked turning his head a fraction. There was a horse coming down the street, running full out, belly to the ground. Pat Fallon was astride that horse, bent low, crouched in the saddle. Jerico realized what Pat was doing. The Texas boy was taking an awful chance, bent on rescuing Jerico if a spark of life was still in Jerico's body. And Jerico didn't want to be rescued. From where he lay he commanded the front entrance of the Stag. There was no other way to do it. Jerico alone, of the attackers, knew that Polly Macklin was in the saloon. The firing grew hot from the possemen. They were shielding Pat Fallon as best they could. From the saloon the fire increased in volume. Pat Fallon, riding like an Indian, swept down on Jerico, swung down from his saddle to catch an arm and drag a wounded man out of range. His hand clutched Jerico's left arm. To an onlooker it would have seemed that the speed was too great, that Pat had lost his grip. Actually Jerico Jones jerked his arm from Pat's hand, rolling inertly in the street.

The horse swept on, staggered, and went down. Pat threw himself clear and at a faltering run, sought shelter around the corner of the store adjoining the Stag. Still Jerico lay inert. A bullet plucked dust from the street beside him. Another tugged at his coat.

Gradually the firing lessened in volume. It was a stalemate. No chance for either side. Touhy called from the store where Pat had taken refuge, called to Sturgis. Apparently Touhy had taken over the command.

"We got you, Sturgis. Give up an' come out!"

A wild, high yell answered from the saloon. That was all.

Now the shots were spasmodic. The men in the Stag were shooting only when they saw a target. The attackers were planning some move; Jerico could not imagine what it might be. The Stag would be a hard nut to crack. From somewhere out of town a train whistled, a long, wailing blast. It seemed to Jerico that he could lie still no longer, that he must move to ease his cramped muscles, but he dared not. The train whistled again.

There was a yelp from inside the Stag. Something had happened that Jerico could not see. He heard Marty Rafferty call tauntingly, could not understand the words. As he lay there in the dust, he heard a sound foreign to the fight, a crackling sound. He saw smoke seep from a shattered window in the Stag. Touhy and the Long L men had succeeded in firing the saloon. They didn't know that Polly

Macklin was inside. Jerico gathered himself, bunching his muscles. He would have to make a run for it. He had to tell Touhy and Pat where Polly was. Even as he gathered himself he saw the front door of the Stag open a crack. A dirty bartender's apron tied to a broom handle, was shoved out. The possemen ceased their fire.

Sturgis called from inside the Stag. "Touhy!"

From the left the deputy answered. "Give up, Sturgis!"

STURGIS' voice was high and shrill. "The hell I give up! We've got that Macklin girl in here. We're comin' out with her in front of us. If you shoot you'll kill her."

The announcement must have caused consternation. Jerico could guess how Pat felt, could imagine Touhy's reaction to the information.

He waited now.

Sturgis called again. "Get horses out in front for us. Get 'em out!"

Pat Fallon called to Sturgis. "If we turn you loose will you let the girl go?"

The answer was a taunting, "Maybe!"

"How many horses?" called Pat.

"Three," Sturgis answered. "Hurry. If you want to see that girl alive——"

Apparently there was dissension inside the Stag. Yells went up. There were angry shouts. The Bar S men did not take kindly to being deserted by their leader. The flames were crackling louder. Evidently the fire was growing.

Suddenly, as though thrown by a gust of wind, the door of the Stag was flung open. Polly Macklin appeared in the doorway. The girl was limp, supported by an arm around her waist. Behind her was Sturgis, holding her up with one arm. The other hand clutched a gun. Man and girl were on the sidewalk. Lon Dennis, gun in hand, backed out of the door, menacing the men inside, holding them back. Sturgis took a step. If a man fired from either side he might hit Polly Macklin. Sturgis and the girl were clear. Dennis was out of the door. They were perhaps fifteen feet from Jerico Jones sprawled in the dust, his right arm still beneath his body.

"Get them horses!" yelled Sturgis and took a step.

As he moved Jerico came up from the street. His gun was in his hand. Sturgis saw that movement, tried to turn, tried to throw the girl in front of him. Too late. Jerico's Colt spoke imperatively. Sturgis reeled back, releasing his grasp on the girl. Polly Macklin pitched forward. Lon Dennis had wheeled, gun rising to level at Jerico. Again the Colt in Jerico's hand bounced up, roaring. Dennis fell back, the second slug striking him even as he fell. His head struck the threshold of the Stag's doorway. He lay inert.

Jerico, on his feet, ran toward Polly Macklin, bent to lift her and carry her to a place of safety. There was no need. A man, his hands shoulder high, stepped from the saloon, lifting his feet to clear Lon Dennis' head. He was followed by others. The Bar S was through, finished.

Pat Fallon ran from the corner of the store toward Jerico. Suddenly the street seemed filled with men. It was all over.

Jerico looked about him. Pat Fallon had Polly Macklin in his arms, was cradling the girl against his chest. Jerico could see Polly's eyes open and stare wonderingly up into Pat's face. The girl's arm stole up to encircle Pat Fallon's neck. Allen of the Circle A was close to Jerico. He had his arm thrown across young Leonard's shoulders. The boy was white faced; there was blood on his shirt and an arm was bandaged. Touhy was at Jerico's side. Whitaker came running from a building, trailing a rifle. Touhy's voice rasped in Jerico's ear.

"I thought you was dead, Jones."

"So did I," answered Jerico. "Let's get these fellows lined up. What will we do with 'em, Touhy?"

The Long L men, reinforced by Pedersen, had the beaten Bar S fighters lined up on the walk in front of the vacant lot. There were fourteen Bar S men. The

Stag Saloon was burning fiercely. Townspeople, wide eyed, were gathering about. Whitaker joined them. He gave orders, men ran for buckets. They must fight the fire to keep the town from burning.

TOUHY looked at Jerico. He looked at the men held prisoner. He shoved back his hat. Two townsmen passed carrying Sturgis' limp body. Others were picking up Lon Dennis, carrying him away. Men were crawling out on the roof of the store nearest the burning Stag. They were not attempting to save the saloon, but were trying to keep the fire from spreading. A line of men was passing filled buckets.

Touhy said, "Hell!"

"Goin' to hold 'em?" asked Jerico.

"I got to," answered Touhy.

"Give 'em ten minutes to get out of town. Tell 'em to leave the country. Shucks, Touhy, they was just workin' for Sturgis. They ain't bad."

Touhy grunted, looked at Jerico and turned away. Jerico watched a man quench a flying ember on the store's roof. His eyes searched for Pat Fallon, failed to find him. Nig Bell was at Jerico's side. So was Marty Rafferty.

"We goin' to let them sons go?" shrilled Marty. "We goin' to turn 'em loose?"

"I reckon," agreed Jerico. "Where's Pat?"

He stopped short. Searching for Pat his eyes had encountered an unexpected sight. There was a train in at the depot, a stock train. Smoke trailed up from the engine. Striding up the street from the station was a giant of a man, two men flanking him on either side. Frank Larey.

Jerico took a step forward and waited. He hardly heard Marty Rafferty's disgusted, "Shucks!"

Larey came on. He glanced at the burning Stag, waited until a bucket had passed, and stepped through the line. He halted in front of Jerico Jones. Mustache bristling, blue eyes filled with questions, Frank Larey confronted his man.

"What the hell does this mean, Jerico?" demanded Larey. "What's happenin' here? Where's Pat? What sort of rawhidin' do you call this?"

Jerico felt strangely weak. It was all over. Done. He looked up at Frank Larey's questioning eyes and made answer.

"Why, Frank," said Jerico Jones, "we just come to town to receive them steers."

It Was Rip Yeager, a Price on His Head, Who Announced that Every Man Should Stick to His Game—but the U. S. Marshal Was Inclined to Agree

EVERY MAN TO HIS GAME

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Author of "The Last Patrol," "Lobo Law," etc.

I

GOOD MEN AND BAD

SCREENED by a fringe of butternut and red oak scrub Heck Short, the redoubtable U. S. Marshal for Northern Oklahoma, and his deputy, Flick Hafey, sat their saddles and stared through the driving rain at the dilapidated ranch house that nestled against the barren face of the knoll two hundred yards away.

A tip had reached Heck that the Yeager gang, fresh from holding up a Santa Fé train at Minadoka, were holed up across the Arkansas River in the Osage Nation. With only Hafey to aid him he had immediately set out to round up as desperate a gang of outlaws as Oklahoma had ever known.

They had been out four days now, crossing and recrossing the river many times, and had seen nothing of their quarry. In that sparsely settled country, with its small ranchers and nesters, men either feared to give information against the Yeagers or were secretly friendly to them. It meant that every ranch house and dugout had to be approached with suspicion and quitted the same way. It made them cautious now.

No smoke rose from the sagging chimney. No horses drooped in the broken-down pole corral.

"Ain't nary a soul there, Heck," said Hafey at last. His face was red from the whipping of the rain and his tone suggested

that his temper was worn thin by the buffeting of the storm that had assailed them for the greater part of the day. "We'll lay up here for the night and get back into the Nation in the mornin'."

He started to move out of the scrub without further delay. Heck stopped him in a hurry.

"Don't make a fool play like that, Flick!" he warned. "This place looks deserted but we're going to make sure before we give 'em a chance to bust away at both of us. You stay here. I'll go up to the house. They know me in this country."

It was said quietly, as was his way. Hafey jerked his head around and stared at him angrily.

"Fool play, eh?" he snorted. "What do you call what you're suggestin'? I'll say you're known! It's a hundred to one that Rip Yeager savvies we're lookin' for him and that he ain't within ten miles of this place. We won't run into any trouble here. But if we should—if by the rusted hinge of hell I'm wrong and there's somebody lookin' this way behind the sights of a rifle, what chance do you think you'll have of reachin' that door? Rifle in a saddle scabbard way down under your slicker!"

HECK'S round and dripping face widened in a grin. "My reputation might help me more than my gun," he said. "One of these hill billies wouldn't hesitate about knocking you over. They might think once or twice before mowing me down. That wouldn't hold good with Rip's bunch. But we'll hardly see anything of them this trip. If it breaks clear in the morning we'll go into Ponca and catch a train for Guthrie."

He blew the rain out of his mustache absent-mindedly.

"I'll wave you in if it's okay," he said as he pressed his knees into his mount.

He was out in the open a moment later.

Hunched over against the rain, he held his horse to a walk. He saw nothing to attract his attention, no sign of life. The house was only a pine board shack, black from its thorough wetting. In the murky shadows of early evening it was a forlorn-looking place. The window on the side from which he approached had been boarded up.

"Hard times hit this place a long while back," he thought, his face sad as he gazed at a rusted toy, half-buried in the mire about the front door, and realized that children had once lived here.

Slipping out of the saddle, he found it the part of wisdom to leave his rifle in the scabbard. Sloshing through the mud he reached the door. A rotten board, all that was left of the step, crunched under his foot as he pushed the door open.

No sound greeted his entrance. The light was going fast, and as the wind swung the door to behind him he squinted about him narrowly at the cold, clammy interior of the one-room house.

He had taken a step or two before he saw that crude bunks curtained with gunny sacking had been built in tiers against the walls. A dead fireplace stood at the end of the room. Through the gloom he saw a man seated before it, a rifle across his knees.

For a moment they stared at each other in mutual surprise. A pile of kindling and shavings at the man's feet said that he had been about to light a fire.

"Thought the place was deserted or I wouldn't have busted in this way," Heck apologized. The casualness of the tone carried no hint of his mounting misgivings. "It's a wet, raw evening."

The man on the stool at the fireplace only stared and did not answer. There was a dreadful alertness about him, though he continued to hold his rifle carelessly across his knees.

HE WAS still in his early forties but his pinched features and sunken cheeks, stamped with the indelible mark of long suffering, gave him the look of fifty, the pallor of his flesh only accentuating the brightness of eyes that burned with the fevered intensity of the sick. An ailing man, clad in faded butternut jeans and a colorless flannel shirt, living on an abandoned ranch; but there was no escaping the feeling of power that burned in his too bright eyes.

Heck felt it. Walking up to the fireplace he found something strangely familiar in the other's bloodless face. Suddenly memory came to life in his brain. His stout old heart skipped a beat. He knew now who this man was; knew that the other recognized him too. This man was none other than Rip Yeager himself!

For a second that was a lifetime in passing, they gazed at each other. Their scrutiny was tinged with respect, for both were formidable men; one an outlaw with

thirty notches on his gun; the other his sworn foe, under oath to bring him in dead or alive some day.

It was a silent recognition. Both were far too shrewd to put it into words.

"I seem to have got off my trail a little," said Heck. It was only a gesture, words to relieve the tension.

"The rain, I guess," Yeager replied. He knew how to bluff too.

Heck grunted and turned his back to the fireplace. His blood ran cold along his spine at the sight that met his eyes. From every bunk the blue nose of a rifle protruded.

In a flash he knew where he stood, realized that he had blundered into the hiding-place of the Yeager gang. Behind those

rifles were desperate men, the lives of every one of them long since forfeited to the law.

He was personally acquainted with most of them, and he did not doubt that they recognized him as easily as Rip had done. Bart Ford, Little Arkansaw, Denver Thompson—they were all dead shots. They could riddle him before he raised a finger.

There was a curious sense of finality about his expectation of flame from the unwavering guns at any instant. He had overstepped himself this time, and Rip Yeager would take his measure without turning a hair.

But it did not come; and Heck refused to honor it with apprehension. He had talked himself out of a number of jack-pots in his time. He was not brash enough to hope that he could do anything of the sort now. But he had always ignored the obvious.

"What place is this?" he asked with apparent disinterest.

"It's the old Bar 8."

"The Bar 8, eh? How might a man get to Ponca?"

"He might get there in a pine box," Rip answered deliberately. "It all depends on how soon he starts."

In its way it was both a warning and an order.

HECK mulled it over for a moment. To run that gauntlet of guns took courage. He comforted himself with the thought that a man dies but once. "They've got me dead to rights," he mused. "Don't matter much whether they get me here or at the door."

"Well, I guess I'll be goin'," he said, "and thanks for the favor."

Glancing neither to right nor left, he started for the door, grimly conscious that the dozen or more guns swung slowly around as he passed so that the hidden men held him covered every step of the way.

It made his scalp crawl, but he gave no sign of it, betrayed no haste. Behind him Rip Yeager watched and made no sign nor sound.

To his surprise, Heck reached the door alive. With iron nerve he paused to settle his slicker over his shoulders. Hand steady, he reached for the latch. He was pulling the door open when a man came tumbling out of one of the bunks.

It was Bart Ford. Even among those case-hardened souls who rode with Rip Yeager he was known as the wild man, merciless, quick to kill. A wild rage was on him now.

"What the hell is the meanin' of this play?" he jerked out, choking in his anger, as Heck stepped outside.

Yeager was on his feet instantly.

"Put that gun down!" he commanded as Ford started to draw a bead on the marshal.

The order seemed to stun Bart. He turned his hard-bitten face to Yeager. "Rip, that's Heck Short! We left him for you, and now he's gittin' away."

Through the open door Heck could be seen climbing into his saddle.

Rip reached out and grabbed Bart's gun. "I said lay off," he ground out fiercely.

Ford struggled for possession of the rifle. "Lemme go, Rip," he pleaded. "Lemme drill him."

Heck was riding away. Suddenly the curtain of rain shut down on him and he was gone.

"Damn it, see what you've done!" Bart wailed. "He's gone."

"Let him go," said Rip. "Heck Short is too brave a man to be shot in the back."

The others were out of the bunks and crowding about him. To a man, they were with Ford in this argument.

"Short was after us, Rip," Little Arkansaw whipped out, his unshaven jaw bristling. "In this game it's either him or us, ain't it?"

The others echoed his thought.

"All right, boys." Rip did not raise his voice, but there was something in his tone that cut through their mutterings like a blade of steel. "Short was alone, unarmed. You can't kill a man like that." He dominated them all in height and

breadth of shoulder; as he stared around at them it was easy to see that he dominated them in spirit as well, sick man though he was.

"He'll round up a posse and be back as soon as hosses will git him here," Denver Thompson warned.

"Let him," said Yeager. "He won't find us here." He swung around to Bart and the Kiowa Kid. "You boys go catch up our broncs in a hurry."

"Hell now, listen to you!" Little Arkansaw stormed. "You can't move in the condition yo're in. You ain't et nuthin' in three days."

"Don't worry about me," Rip answered, and some of the grimness was gone from his face at the other's solicitude. "This night's made to order for us. We're headin' for the Strip."

"It's a long ride, but we ain't safe short of there, thanks to you," Bart grumbled. "Some day you'll regret the stand you took with Short just now. He'll put you on the shelf before he's through."

"Yeah?" Rip smiled faintly as he turned away. "Reckon I'll give him quite a run for it."

II

THE LABOR OF THE LORD

ON A little grassy flat deep in the jungle-like Cimarron bottoms, warmed by the rays of a September sun, Rip Yeager's long riders sprawled at ease. Head pillowed against a saddle, Little Arkansaw made sweet sounds with a mouth harp. On a dirty blanket others played poker.

More than a week had passed since they had won back to the wild, uninhabited Cherokee Strip. The last rumors of pursuit had long since died out. For more than a hundred miles in every direction there was no settlement, only an occasional squatter's dug-out. The infrequent shots that echoed over the oak scrub meant nothing more ominous than the sudden demise of a wild turkey.

Rip Yeager's appetite had been teased with more than one delicacy in this setting of silence and peace. It had all been without effect; he was still a sick man.

When he appeared this morning he was far from happy, and for reasons only indirectly connected with the condition of his stomach, though he was immediately the center of an admiring group.

Rip had undergone a transformation. No longer was he the weather-toughened trail rider with the bark on. The boots were there, but that was all. His saddle apparel had given place to a sober, dull black garb. The shirted frock coat he wore was stiff and uncomfortable. His Stetson was a flat brimmed black. A minister's collar and a boiled shirt completed his attire.

Every one of his hard-boiled, bewhiskered long riders examined him as though they had never seen him before and might not again.

"Doggone if I wouldn't take you for some other feller," said Little Arkansaw, rasping his jaw.

"Not if Rip knows it, nobody won't 'take' him fer anybody," countered the Kiowa Kid jocularly.

Rip stared at them with a cold eye, scarcely softened by the glasses he wore. "What's the matter with you idiots?" he demanded crustily. "Didn't you ever lay eyes on a preacher before?"

"Not for one hell of a long while, Rip," Bart Ford roared, holding his sides. "Yo're kind of restful."

"Now, Rip, look," Denver Thompson thrust in, habitually dubious of the advisability of everything. "Why don't you give up this fool notion of goin' to Burnt Springs? Daggone it, I don't like the idee of you traipsin' off by yoreself this way!" It would have been hard to tell, from his eternal pessimism, that Thompson was an inveterate chance-taker, a man who had ridden in the past with the Doolins and the Daltons. "You forgettin' that you got a wife and baby to think of?"

"Pshaw! I'm really doin' this for Bella and the kid. I told you I'm going to take

this here cure," Rip went on severely, "and I'm goin' to do it. Nobody can see through me. What do you suppose I got this outfit on for?" He swore as he ran a finger around inside the tight collar.

"Nobody can see through you the way you are now; but Heck Short or some of them fellers would just as soon fix that up fer you," Bart retorted meaningfully, a glint in his hard eyes.

"Sho'! They wouldn't perforate Rip in a minister's coat!" Little Arkansaw protested.

Yeager took a hand now, snorting wrathfully. "Never mind makin' fun of this rig. I guess it's all right," he cut them off. He looked down at himself almost with the consciousness of awakened virtue.

"That's gospel!" The Kiowa Kid looked around at the others in pretended rebuke. "You boys don't have to insult the minister's blood in Rip's fambly. It give him a swell idee!"

"If you don't shut your trap, I'll make a liar out of this get-up and split you wide open," Rip roared at him fiercely.

"Now, now, don't pay no 'ttention to the boys, deacon," put in Little Arkansaw soothingly. "I'll have 'em all broke an' ready to lead by the time you come back." He was to head the gang while Yeager was away at the Springs, taking the cure.

Rip jerked a nod. "Just see you do," he warned. "If I didn't have this trouble in my stomach I'd take a turn at 'em right now, and you too! Let's be goin', Denver."

THREE of the outlaws returned to the blanket on which they had been playing poker. The rest watched Rip and Denver climb the slope to a waiting wagon. Rip held a hand to his weakened back from bitter necessity. Unconsciously it rendered a telling illusion of dignity.

"He'll do," Little Arkansaw grinned. "Looks like a parson from 'way back. He couldn't help hisself."

Rip said little as the buckboard jolted over the faint trail through the buckbrush and rolled away to the railroad, miles to the north. Denver Thompson, tried and true in a tight spot, continued his gloomy predictions until Rip silenced him. The latter was in no mood for argument. It had not been out of curiosity that he had finally decided on this dangerous trip to Burnt Springs to drink the waters and take the baths.

The sun burned overhead and slid down the sky. It was late by the time they reached the Santa Fé. Rip was hot, dry and uncomfortable, and his mood was bleaker than ever.

"You can drop me off at the tank," he directed Denver. "Turn around then, and dig out of here."

Burnett's Tank was little more than a water stop. Without question, the operator flagged the 6:13 for the dusty circuit rider. Taking a seat in the rear of a half-filled day coach Rip settled down for an all-night ride.

With a price on his head, he eyed every man who passed through the car. It was after midnight before relaxing vigilance permitted him to doze off between stops. When he climbed down from the train the next morning at Burnt Springs, he felt as though he had not rested at all.

He unkinked the cramp in his limbs gingerly, standing on the station platform. At the same time his eye ran over the single street of the little town.

The pitiless morning sun revealed it in all its unlovely details. Peeling paint, cracked boards and broken windows attested a certain indifference to the responsibilities. Dogs slept in the dust and occasionally got kicked out of the way.

It was no sleepy village, he decided immediately. There were too many saloons for that. His knowing eye picked out holes in the swinging signs that could only have been made by the slugs from a six-gun. Though he had never laid eyes on the town before today, he knew its pattern thoroughly. There were dozens like it in the Territory.

While this reassured him in one sense,

it carried with it a warning as well. He had hoped Burnt Springs would be different. Trudging up the street to the hotel, he realized the folly of that hope.

The Mineral Springs Sanatorium was an unprepossessing establishment. Clearly it had seen better days. A large gallery, with an occasional board missing, ran across the front, with worn and comfortable chairs for its patrons. Several men lounged there, cattlemen by the look of them. They looked Rip over with interest as he climbed the steps.

Chris Hagerman, the proprietor, fat and affable, brightened visibly at the prospect of having a minister under his roof and talked as though acquaintance with the cloth was no new thing in his life. Rip signed himself the Rev. Timothy Samuels, of Yocum, Texas.

"Yes, sir, Reverend," Hagerman effused; "we'll just give you a fine sunny exposure, lookin' toward the meetin' house—though it ain't been used for a couple years. How'll that do?"

"I don't care about the room; I came here to get well," Rip answered bluntly.

He was shown around the establishment and a diet and routine of baths laid out for him. He began the cure with determination, drinking untold quantities of the foul smelling mineral water and steeping himself in the vapor baths.

THAT evening, out on the porch, he tried to decide what amusements a bona fide preacher allowed himself while not on round-up. He didn't get far with this knotty problem, but an hour later found him strolling up the street to get away from the persistent attentions of two or three fellow patients. He was not in love with his ailment and he didn't propose to talk about it all day long.

His glance yearned after the careless figures lounging in and out of the saloons. He passed these places by, however; and his attention was presently distracted as he paused across the street from the bank and gazed speculatively at its front. "It would be a cinch to hoist the place," he concluded. Then he caught himself.

"Damn it all!" he fumed. "I got to get such nonsense out of my head. I certainly can't afford to think about such things now."

He received a little shock when his eye ran down the street and alighted on the man for whom he had instinctively watched since his arrival. There was no mistaking the weathered face and long, flowing mustache of the town marshal. His flopping vest momentarily concealed the star pinned on his shirt; but Rip read accurately the gleam of curiosity in the man's level gray eyes as he took in the ministerial figure.

Yeager turned around and went the other way. He sighed as he returned to the hotel veranda. Taking the cure wasn't going to be any easier than he had feared.

Religiously he took the baths, drank the infernal stuff that was going to help him and kept to himself. He even kept away from tobacco.

With the passing days he found himself feeling better. His appetite began to return and for the first time for weeks he enjoyed the delightful pangs of hunger and longed for a taste of the juicy wild turkey with which Denver and Little Arkansaw had so often tried to tempt him.

Returning health filled him with a mounting unrest, however. Thanks to Little Arkansaw he had received a letter from his wife, and he longed to see her and the baby. But he knew better. He had scraped a speaking acquaintance with Ab Tolman, the Burnt Springs town marshal. He told himself he had nothing to fear from the old man.

Strangely enough, he developed a liking for Ab. They often sat together on the hotel porch, spinning yarns. Chris Hagerman sat with them at times. But Chris had only one topic of conversation, limited to bemoaning the fact that but for the waywardness of Burnt Springs his establishment would be filled to capacity. He was at it again this evening.

"People won't come here, knowin' the reputation of the town," he wailed. "The blacklegs have had the run of the place for years. I don't blame Ab; he does what he can. What Burnt Springs needs, Parson, is a good dose of two-fisted religion."

"It might help," Ab agreed weightily. "Folks ought to be awakened. I ain't a reeligious man myself, but it's plain to be seen that there's brands to be saved from the burnin' here."

Chris nodded his round head. "It's a rich field for those who labor for the Lord. I'm tellin' you if I was a preacher I'd raise my voice for Him!"

THERE was an insinuation in their words too plain to be missed. Rip professed not to catch the hint, but he was filled with a mild panic. "Some young man will hear the call one of these days," he said piously. "The Lord won't forget you. When I get back home I'll ask my congregation to pray for you."

"Well, I'm a firm believer in the power of prayer," Chris averred, "but there ain't no dodgin' the fact that prayer has got to be given a helpin' hand sometimes." He was not through speaking, and if he paused it was only to give his words greater effect. "I been thinkin'—that is, Ab and me have been wonderin'—if you wouldn't try to lead us out of the wilderness while you're here. There's the meetin'-house standin' idle—wouldn't be no trick to get it cleaned out. The old organ is still in first-rate condition; might dusty, of course. Mrs. Foss will be glad to oblige with the playin'. Now if it wa'n't nothin' more than Sunday evenin' prayer-meetin'——"

Rip Yeager began to have trouble with his collar.

"Gentlemen, I'm obliged to you for the compliment," he got out hesitantly as he shifted about in his chair. "I've never spared myself when duty called; but I'm a sick man——"

"The Lord will give you strength," Chris insisted.

"That's right," Ab seconded, wagging his head. "Don't the Bible say somethin' about a sick man slayin' Goliah with the jawbone of an ass, or somethin'? It's kinda mixed up in my mind. But no matter, Parson; if the savin' of souls is your business you got to preach to us."

Rip said no and no and no again, until a flash of sense warned him that he was cornered; that his safety demanded his acquiescence.

"All right," he agreed solemnly, wondering what he would take for a text. There wasn't a vestige of a remembered sermon in his mind. He put the question up to them.

"Suit yourself, Parson," Chris beamed. "Take what text you like and you can be sure you won't go wrong."

"Well, maybe I'll make it a free sermon," said Rip. "Maybe we'll get along without a text."

Up in his room a few minutes later he removed his wilted collar and tossed his frock coat to the floor.

"Damn this rig!" he exploded and stared

at his reflection in the mirror. "It's like to spell my finish now."

Downstairs Ab and Chris were still congratulating themselves on their victory. Both had conveniently forgotten to mention to Rip that the last two ministers of the gospel Burnt Springs had known had been run out of town and the meeting-house shot up.

"I'll spread the word around," Chris volunteered, "and speak to Mrs. Foss and the wimmen folks. We'll ride herd on sin for a week or two, at least!"

"I hope Mulcahy's boys don't act up when they hear the news," Ab rejoined with some anxiety. "Mebbe we should've said somethin' to the Parson about 'em. They been purty ornery in the past."

"I wouldn't say nothin'," Chris declared with great positiveness. "The Lord is on his side, and by the cut of his jaw he's got plenty sand in him on his own account. Mike Mulcahy won't be runnin' him out of Burnt Springs, I'm thinkin'!"

Mr. Mulcahy had other ideas on the matter when the news reached him behind the bar of his Silver Dollar saloon. One way and another, he was growing rich in Burnt Springs as it was and he did not propose to have the even tenor of prosperity disturbed. Calling his satellites about him he laughed long and heartily at the information that Burnt Springs was going to get religion again.

"Do we stand for the meddlin' of this sky pilot or don't we?" he demanded.

"We don't!" was the chorused answer.

"All right," said Mike. "Pass the word along to the boys. We'll run this gospel shark out of town as easy as we did the others."

III

PARSON GUNSMOKE

AS SUNDAY wore on Rip grasped the sliding moments with desperation. He knew he was putting himself under the judging eye of every curious soul in town. Hagerman and old Ab had seen to that. The Sunday evening service had been advertised like a circuit-court attraction.

It was late afternoon before he took hold of himself with iron grip.

"Look here, this is no jokin' matter. It's damn serious," he burst out. "I'm a preacher now, and I've got to preach a sermon; and by the Lord, it's got to be a hummer! If it's sin-bustin' this town wants, and they think I'm the man that can give it to 'em, that's what they're goin' to get."

Outwardly steady as a rock, with measured tread he entered the dining room for supper.

"Evenin', Parson," old Chris purred unctuously. "Dare say you're packin' your wallop for us poor devils tonight."

"Brother," Rip assured him soberly, "I'm prepared."

Eight o'clock was the hour set for the service. The little meeting-house was comfortably filled minutes before that time.

There was a craning of necks on the benches as the new preacher stepped through the rear door and walked to the pulpit, his clothes brushed and his hair slicked down. Rip took no notice of it. Stepping up firmly to the edge of the platform he cleared his throat impressively and launched into his message.

"Brethern and sisters," he said sonorously, staring them down with the fierceness of his eye, "our sermon this evenin' will be from the Holy Scripture and from Life. I didn't bring my Bible along with me, and I don't intend to refer to it. But when I get done, you'll find that I haven't been very far away from it all along."

He cleared his throat again. "The way of the transgressor is hard." He shot the words at them and scowled.

Chris Hagerman scuffled his feet in the aisle and settled back. This fellow knew his business, he decided. He glanced at Ab Tolman. That individual was staring up at the minister with rapt attention as the rolling voice echoed in the building. Chris smiled, and his own gaze returned to the pulpit as the hard-headed, homely and in-

dubitably true indictment of sinfulness unfolded.

He had only impatience for the faint sound of hoof-beats outside in the street, although he had been vaguely listening for something of the sort. He wanted to give himself over completely to the discourse, but uneasiness began to yeast in him.

Rip was fairly launched by now. He began to thunder and raise his fists. Carried away by his own eloquence, he was almost enjoying himself.

The spell he cast was so genuine that most of his listeners were not at once aware of the sharply growing pound of hoofs beyond the door. Suddenly a fusillade of shots from that direction carried away half a dozen windows and thwacked into the boards of the building. One wild slug pinged off the bell in the cupola with a shivering clang.

RIP froze and his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. People ducked and began to slide down in the benches.

"Posse!" was the unspoken word that leaped into Rip Yeager's brain. Forgetting his rôle of minister and the staring congregation, he made a lightning draw from both hips and with a six-gun in either hand crouched ready to drop behind the pulpit.

Then he recollected himself. In a flash he realized the nature and meaning of this disturbance. He straightened abruptly with a face of thunder.

Women fluttered, children whimpered, in the momentary quiet. Men whirled angrily on their benches, muttering. No one looked to Ab Tolman in the excitement. Ab sat still with his gaze fixed on the minister in blank astonishment.

After no more than a brief interval, the stamp of the racing ponies could be heard returning. Wild howls and flat bangs began to sound afresh.

It was too much for Rip. He leaped off the platform to the floor. Half a dozen steps brought him up the aisle, his ready guns still in his hands, the tensed thumbs over the hammers, as he made for the open door.

The marshal's jaw dropped. His surprise did not prevent him from staring after Yeager with eyes from which the scales seemed to have dropped. He was no longer interested in the immediate salvation of his soul.

Rip Yeager's guns began spouting as soon as he cleared the people in the meeting-house. Shot after shot roared from the heavy .45s, to be answered by shouts of injured rage and astonishment from the discomfited roughs in the street.

Half-risen from his seat, the marshal saw a strange sight as he gazed past the minister's shoulder at the men outside.

Dust puffed under the hoofs of their ponies. Hats flew from their heads. More than one ducked sharply as though conscious of the near presence of angry bees. Yells rent the air. Two of the broncs

pawed the air and came down headed the other way. Scared faces took in a fleeting glimpse of the stern Sabbatical figure in the doorway of the meeting-house. Then the routed cavalcade thundered down the street and out of town in hasty and unquestioning self-defense.

Rip lowered his guns, glared after the fleeing troublemakers, and spat into the dust. Then he turned and strode grimly back through the buzzing congregation, which stilled almost reverently as he reappeared.

"I've never seen smoother gun work," Ab whispered to himself. "They don't teach that stuff in the ministry!"

Slamming down the .45s on the pulpit, Rip wiped his hands on his bandana and faced the battery of eyes with a countenance of flint.

"We will now proceed with the sermon," he announced firmly. "Now, as I was sayin', no man is born bad. There's no such thing as a born evil-doer. Nine times out of ten it's the way he's livin'—the way he's made to live, by us other God-fearin', law-abidin' citizens. We are just as guilty as anybody when we hound our perplexed and desperate fellow men from hole to hole out there in the wild brakes."

Covert smiles appeared, but no grins of derision. Attention was soon more rapt than ever as he continued. He had been more than a little surprised at himself at first; but as his keen eye roved, he read everywhere the credulous belief that his outburst had been no more than sacerdotal severity.

It was not the same everywhere, however. Old Ab sat as though petrified, staring at him with eyes which had narrowed with calculation. The sermon had lost all significance for him, and he pursed his lips and scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably.

Drawing his head into his collar, turtle-wise, he slipped out of the meeting-house unnoticed a few minutes later. Walking away through town, out of line with the open door beyond which the phenomenon from Texas still roared out his homespun but effective denunciations, Ab paused more than once to glance behind him in puzzlement.

Where had he seen that face before—if, indeed, he had done so at all, and it was not a trick of his imagination? "Samuels, Samuels," he murmured, testing the suggestion of the name without result. He shook his head.

He did not give up the problem, however. Letting himself into the building which accommodated his office, he sat down in the sagging swivel chair and rocked back and forth, caressing his chin, a thoughtful look in his eye.

"I'll swear I've seen him somewhere," he mused. "Now where was it?"

Suddenly memory stirred in him and he darted to a file of dog-eared handbills. Across the top of the bills, in large, black letters, was the word WANTED; each bore the likeness of a wanted man.

Ab leafed through the papers rapidly until he came to the one he sought. He looked at it long. His mouth tightened as he leaned back in the protesting chair.

He was still unsatisfied. Leaning forward, he hunted until he found a stub of pencil. Painstakingly he drew a minister's collar on the man in the picture. This seemed to suit him better, and he pencilled a pair of glasses on the pictured face.

Surveying the results of his handiwork, he straightened as if struck. A very creditable likeness of the Rev. Timothy Samuels looked up at him from the paper.

"It's him, all right," he said finally. "There ain't no doubt about it. He's Rip Yeager."

Putting away the papers with a hand that shook, Ab stepped out of the door and hurried to the telegraph office to wire Heck Short.

IV

ON THE SHELF

NOT for many long months had the citizens of Burnt Springs had such an intriguing personality in their midst as the fighting parson. They were not slow to register their approval. Man after man—even a woman or two—approached the Reverend Samuels with congratulations.

Rip did not know what to make of it. While it was pleasing to feel that his Sabbatical disguise was ironclad, mature consideration warned him that he had come within an inch of going too far, and he scanned the faces of those who accosted him for the slightest sign of deception.

Ab Tolman, particularly, came in for

keen study when they met later that night. Rip decided that the marshal's acceptance of his feat was genuine, if a trifle less enthusiastic than the others.

Nevertheless, he would not be comforted. Alone in his room he fell prey to a sense of false security. Why hadn't he requested Tolman, with dignity, to quell the disturbance? It was a useless question now, but it would not let him alone.

Word reached him that Mulcahy's crowd was threatening revenge. He didn't bother to think twice about that. More pressing problems engaged his attention.

He spent a restless night, and faced Monday morning without interest. Full awareness of his precarious position made him more lonely than ever, despite the fuss that had been made over him. He experienced a driving nostalgia for his wife and baby.

For long minutes he studied a likeness of his first-born. When he thought of the child and of his wife, a wave of poignant regret assaulted him. He spent an hour of deep chagrin in contemplation of the stark facts of his life; and he emerged from it, as always, shaken and in a savage mood.

It was a mood that demanded to be assuaged. Had he dared he would have thrown caution to the winds and sought surcease in whisky. But that would not do. Instead, he walked down the sun-filled street until, attracted by the merchandise in a window display, he stepped inside, with the image of his baby in his heart and his hand in his pocket.

He would have found no comfort in the token he purchased could he have observed the occurrences of the next few minutes in Ab Tolman's office.

That gentleman was reclining in his accustomed position, with his feet on his desk and a look of serious cogitation on his face, when the rear door squeaked slightly. Ab had listened to the arrival of the 11:15 a few minutes before, and he knew what it bore of interest to himself; but he had not expected his visitor to arrive in this cautious manner.

He swung his feet down, wheeling in the chair. Heck Short, just arrived from Guthrie, stood in the back door.

"Well, Heck! You didn't lose any time," Ab greeted.

Short appeared disinterested in the amenities.

"No," he replied quietly, "I didn't. I got your wire and I started immediately. 'Something interesting. Come at once.' Ab, I'm not interested in conundrums. Suppose you tell me who I'll find waiting for me."

AB DID not respond to his matter-of-fact tone in like manner. The local marshal's brows rose. Modulated surprise sounded in his voice:

"Heck, you certainly are a wonder! I have got an ace in the hole for you; and there was a reason, and a good one, for your sneakin' in here the back way. But how'd you know it?"

"I have an idea or two, Ab," Heck said dryly. "I knew from the wording of your wire that it was big game. And if it's who I think it is, you won't be able to suggest any caution that I haven't thought of. I happen to know the man."

"Who d'you think it is, then?" Ab demanded wonderingly.

"Why, Rip Yeager," Heck answered, to get it over with.

Ab's widening gaze told him that he had not guessed wrong.

"How'd you know that, Heck?"

"I told you I know the man. I know he's sick. I know the reputation of the Burnt Springs hotel. And if that isn't enough, it happens that Yeager's gang stuck up the Wheelman bank less than a week ago. They got away clean, but they were seen. Rip wasn't with them."

Tolman was so interested in this colloquy that he did not observe Rip as the latter passed the office on his way to the hotel. Short's fixed gaze as he concluded impelled the other to whirl around and look, however. He recognized the black frock coat of the Reverend Samuels, and quickly turned a look of inquiry on Short.

Heck nodded slowly. "It's Rip, all right," he added.

They watched as Yeager mounted the steps of the hotel porch, a small parcel in his hand, and sank into a chair.

"Yeager!" Ab breathed. "I was sure it was him. And yet——" He paused, and his eyes became fretted at the corners. "Heck, what d'you want we should do?" he queried.

Heck was unhurried. He sat down on the edge of the desk and considered.

"How long has he been here?" he asked at length.

Tolman told him.

"Have you seen anybody with him?"

"N-no, can't say I have."

"Any strangers around town at all—outside of him?"

Ab couldn't honestly say no. "But, Heck, there always is a few. That may not mean anything."

Short was not swayed one way or the other. "I'm not entirely satisfied that he's here alone," he said. "Rip has a disconcertin' habit of combining business and pleasure. Any big deals through the bank here, in the last few days?"

"Haven't heard of any."

"We-ll—that wouldn't make so much difference, anyway." Heck frowned, and shook his head. "I don't like it, Ab. It ain't like Yeager—unless this ailment of his has begun to get him down."

"Why not make it a sure thing?" Ab inquired. "Let me round up a few of the boys."

HECK shook his head again. "Can't do it, Ab. I've promised myself I'd take him alive. Rip will never give up unless I get him dead to rights. I'll sneak up the back way, go through the hotel, and nail him on the porch. In the meantime, you——"

"I wish you'd let me get you a few boys, Heck," Ab repeated earnestly. "Let me go with you."

Short eyed him coolly. There was something in his level regard that commanded obedience. "I told you how I'll work it," he resumed. He looked at his watch. "And while I'm doin' it, you get down to the station and make sure you stop the eastbound. Hold it, if you have to. I'll hustle him onto the train and get him to Guthrie late tonight. I want to avoid any chance of havin' him taken away from me."

"All right," Ab agreed. "But Heck, I wish you'd——"

Short was not listening. His gun was out of his shoulder holster and he was examining it with care. The other watched him while he made sure of his weapon and slipped it out of sight once more. Without a word Heck turned to the back door and stepped out into the blazing sunshine along the backs of the buildings.

Pots and pans rattled in the hotel kitchen as he stepped in. A hall ran from front to rear through the hotel. Heck drew his gun and, keeping his eye on the front door, moved silently forward. He had made sure that Rip was still on the porch, but he did not know at what moment the outlaw might decide to get up and come in.

Reaching the front entrance he thanked his stars that the screen door had been taken down for the fall. He had only to take a precautionary peep and slip through.

Rip sat with his back to the door, the paper package sagging in his hand, over the chair arm. Heck's brows drew down. Only the deep stress of private trouble would ever have allowed Rip Yeager to place himself in such a position of peril. Not only was his back unprotected, but his gun hand was not free.

But the law is no respecter of personal tribulations. Heck moved forward. The first intimation Rip had of danger was when something hard and unwavering poked him in the ribs.

"Stick 'em up, Rip!"

Though jarred to his soul, Rip Yeager had no intention of giving up so easily. The package flew out of his fingers at the same instant that an iron hand grabbed for his wrist, missed, and fastened upon his coat sleeve.

Together the two struggled, panting, as Rip fought to get his hand under his coat. His strength was hampered by his sitting position, but his nerve was unshaken. His face was like granite.

"You're licked, Rip," Heck gasped, meeting his stare. "Might as well give up."

His six-gun was still thrust into Yeager's side, the hammer raised under his flexed thumb.

"Like hell I will!" the outlaw replied.

The chair wavered, scraping. Yeager lurched, and the sleeve of his coat ripped slightly.

"Don't make me kill you, Rip," Heck pleaded, feeling his grip on the sleeve giving away. Yeager's answer was another vicious jerk. Their eyes met again 'n flinty opposition; Rip Yeager's smoky vith rage, Short's steady with determination. "So long—Rip," Heck got out hoarsely.

Rip suddenly went limp. Something in the other's eyes warned that this was the end.

"You win," he growled.

HECK took his guns and snapped a cuff on him. "You drew that awful fine, Rip," he panted.

A curious crowd gathered at once. The package Rip had had in his hand had rolled to the sidewalk and come undone. It contained a little silver cup with the word "Baby" engraved on its side. Mike Mulcahy picked it up. He was enjoying the moment even though he did not understand the reason for the parson's arrest.

With a derisive laugh he dropped a two-bit piece into the cup. "Boys," he roared, "shell out for the gospel shark. Shure he's findin' himself in a hell of a fix."

Rip's eyes blazed. Forgetting that he was shackled to the marshal, he leaped at Mulcahy, dragging Heck along with him. "Hand me that cup," he ground out.

"Hand it over." Heck seconded as Mulcahy hesitated.

Something in his tone compelled obedience.

"Heck, do me a favor," Rip muttered contemptuously. "This tinhorn is over his head. Tell him who I am."

Heck found a peculiar satisfaction in obliging him.

"Huh?" Big Mike gasped. The crowd laughed at his chagrin.

"Laugh that off, Mike," someone jeered. "If you'd known it was Rip Yeager you

was tryin' to run out of town you'd have crawled into a hole and pulled the hole in after yuh!"

Heck spoke to his prisoner. "We'll go in and pack your stuff," he said. "We're taking the noon train to Guthrie."

It did not take them long to gather up the few things Rip had brought with him. The latter handed the marshal the silver cup.

"I wish you'd see that the baby gets this, Heck," he said.

Heck nodded. "Thinking of your family now, eh?" he queried brusquely. "Too bad you didn't start doing that a long while ago, Rip. I ain't fooling myself; there's a good streak in you."

"I'm afraid it ain't very wide," Rip said glumly.

"No? Tolman tells me you preached quite a sermon last night. I should like to have heard you. You must have been pretty good."

"So he sent for you." Rip shook his head. "I knew I'd made a great mistake."

"You've made a lot of them——"

"I sure made one when I let you get away that evening at the Bar 8," Rip muttered, his glance straying to the steel brace-

let on his wrist. "A man ought to stick to his game."

V

OUTLAW WAGES

SEATED side by side in two battered chairs in the swaying combination mail and express car, with only the express messenger to keep them company, captor and captive made a strange pair as the heavy train clicked over the rails through the long afternoon. There was no hatred between them. Save for the handcuff that bound them together there was nothing to suggest that one was taking the other back to stand trial for his life.

They were not due in Guthrie until well after midnight—time enough for anything to happen. Heck had canvassed the possibilities, and he was not discounting the chance that someone in Burnt Springs friendly to Rip, if not some member of the Yeager gang itself, had flashed word ahead by telegraph. The Yeagers had friends; word could be got to them in a hurry. They were used to holding up trains. There would be nothing to stop them from holding up this one.

Little was said as Number Seven ran on into the evening. Neither man felt like talking, each occupied with his own thoughts. If those of Rip Yeager were melancholy he managed to conceal the fact beneath his habitual stoicism. His head swayed to the movements of the car, and his limbs relaxed.

Stops were few. At each one the express messenger threw open the door of the car in the discharge of his duties. Rip's eyes always strayed to the opening. Reading his thought, Heck said nothing.

The outlaw's head involuntarily inclined toward the draughty door at one station. Night had fallen. Heck did not miss the other's keener interest. He asked the express messenger where they were.

"Burnett's Tank."

"Burnett's, eh? Wild stretch through here." He turned to Rip. "Must have been somewhere along in here that you got on, wasn't it?"

"It was right here," Rip admitted, unmoved.

"Yeh?" Heck laughed shortly. "I'm afraid you're not going to get off here, Rip."

Yeager's silence was an answer in itself.

Burnett's Tank was left behind as the train gathered speed once more. Soon it was rushing through the night, the wild roar of driving pistons and the rain of cinders on the car roof punctuated by the eery scream of the whistle.

"Fifty miles ahead of us now without a stop," Heck made the mental calculation, relaxing slightly in his seat. He was consulting his watch when, without warning, the sharp hiss of the air hose made the blood leap in his veins as the train lost speed under the shuddering clutch of the brakes. He stiffened in his chair.

Rip's eyes gleamed inscrutably in the light of the lamps in the ceiling of the car as he observed the marshal's apprehensiveness.

"It ain't going to do your friends any good if they're after you tonight, Rip," the latter declared, meeting his look with one of determination. "They won't get you."

YEAGER had not seriously considered the possibility until this moment; but as Heck's tenseness mounted, a new note crept into the outlaw's manner—one of expectancy, if not grim exultation.

The express messenger was already at the little iron-grilled window in the door as the car came to a grinding stop. There was nothing to be seen. He started to unlock the door preparatory to rolling it open.

"Don't open that door," Heck warned sharply.

The man desisted. He returned to the small window as voices were heard outside in the night.

Heck reached for his gun. He was taking no chances. His eyes were glued to the express messenger's face.

That individual hailed someone through the window. It was a member of the train crew. Still the marshal's patience was thin, his anxiety strung to the snapping point.

"What is it?" he demanded imperatively.

After a moment's colloquy the messenger turned back.

"Steer on the track," he explained, grinning.

Heck heaved a sigh. "It sure had me guessing for a minute," he confessed.

Rip had not spoken a word throughout, nor did he now. His heart sank, however, when a few minutes later the train lurched ahead once more and slowly gathered momentum.

The express messenger returned to the packages which had come aboard at Burnett's Tank. Rip watched him with a curiously alert, yet vacant, gaze. Heck was musing over the scare which he had just received.

None of them was prepared for the shock that came with lightning suddenness. The tremendous crash ahead and the shuddering tremor of the express car were simultaneous. The heavy car buckled violently in the midst of a bedlam of shrieking steam and a series of rending smashes. With a mighty heave giant hands stood it on end for a dizzy second and then slammed it into the ditch.

In a welter of snapping beams and crunching plates the combination smoker and day coach came plowing through the rear end of the car. The express messenger's scream of terror died in his throat as the telescoping car caught him.

Their chairs smashed to kindling, Heck and his prisoner were flung to the floor. Falling shelves, boxes, and hurtling express packages buried them.

The breath was knocked out of them for a moment. With his free hand Rip Yeager pawed aside the splintered shelving and litter of burst express packages that rested on him. His head was bleeding, but the injury was only a minor one.

The top of the express messenger's desk lay across Heck's body. Rip yanked it away.

"Come on," he yelled. "We're gettin' out of here."

Short groaned as Yeager yanked at his arm.

"My—legs," he got out. "Something is pinning me down."

Rip struggled in the darkness, trying to free him.

"It's the stove!" he grunted. "Got you just below the knees. Hurts, eh?"

"Numb," Heck managed, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "I'll make out—somehow."

Rip made no response. Together the two men paused to listen. The hiss of steam was continuous from the overturned locomotive. Men could be heard shouting. A woman's scream reached them. Heck glanced toward the smashed rear of the car, where the express messenger lay dead. He shuddered.

"God!" ejaculated Rip suddenly. "Do you hear that?"

Clear above the shriek of escaping steam they caught an angry, fluctuating crackling.

Heck's nostrils dilated. There was no need to test the air, however. Tendrils of smoke began to steal through the sprung seams of the car.

"It's keno for us," Rip said hopelessly. "The wreck's burnin' up."

"Somebody'll come," Heck hung on. "We'll get out of this yet. I won't give up."

BUT nobody came. Outside, the cries of men continued, steam blew at a gradually lessened pressure; but help did not appear. The crackling of the flames was louder now. A flicker of light, lurid and sullen, stealing through the smashed wreckage at the car-end, foretold their fate unless they got out in a hurry.

The two men were silent, listening, waiting, and—one of them at least—hoping. Heck would not relinquish his faith in their rescue. Rip Yeager raised his hand, staring about him as he half-sat and half-lay on the splintered car floor; but his look was suspicious, almost contemptuous of what the next hour held for him.

"Some finish!" he muttered stonily.

The smoke had grown so thick in the car it was a gray haze.

"There's still a chance," Heck choked, the smoke strangling him. "We'll hang on, Rip——"

"We'll hang on till we slide off," Rip snapped back.

As Heck gazed at him he seemed to reach a decision. He shook his head. "I've been foolin' myself, I guess. They ain't comin' to get me out of here. You'll have to make it alone——"

Rip's eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I ain't forgot what you did for me that evenin' at the Bar 8," said Heck. "Get the keys out of my pocket and unlock the cuffs." He broke into a fit of coughing at the end.

Yeager got the keys and released himself. The flames were closer now, eating into the wreckage near at hand. The smother of smoke was almost unbearable.

"You better get going," Heck advised.

Rip only grunted, fumbling around in the lurid, flickering light. A long tongue of flame leaped up through the smoke, and they felt the heat of it on their faces.

"Get out of here, I tell you," Heck snapped. "You'll get the same dose that's waitin' for me."

"Shut up!" Rip commanded. A cough wracked him as he continued to tug at the stove which held Heck's legs.

PRESENTLY something gave. The marshal felt a pang of fresh pain as the released blood flowed back into his limbs. A groan escaped him as Rip Yeager began to drag him toward the broken, gaping door. Fangs of fire licked out at them. The outlaw's hard face was a fighting mask.

"We'll make it, and be damned to 'em!" he growled as he dropped over the edge of the car. He found his footing in a moment. His chest bulged as he drank in the cool air outside. Suddenly, as he was about to turn back to Heck, he glanced away.

Heck heard the near-by shout; saw Yeager stiffen and hesitate. A shot rang out then. The slug slapped into Rip and spun him around on his heels. With a surprised look on his face he crumpled to the ground.

"Hold on there—don't shoot," Heck cried, aghast, as he dragged himself to the door, his face hard. A man ran up, rifle in hand.

It was Bill Chilton, of Oklahoma City. Heck was well acquainted with him, having deputized him on several occasions. This was his first knowledge that the man had been on the train.

"Knew you was up here with Yeager," Chilton panted. "Figured you'd both been killed or I'd got here quicker. Been busy gettin' the women out." He flashed a glance at Rip, squirming in the ditch. "Guess I finished him——"

"Drop that rifle, you idiot, and help me down out of here," Heck commanded in a cold, dead voice.

At his direction Chilton dragged Rip back from the wreck. Heck crawled after them. The express car was blazing already.

"You didn't git out none too soon," Chilton told him.

"I wouldn't have got out at all but for him," Heck glowered. He raised his pris-

oner's head gently. "How are you making it, Rip?"

They gazed at each other for a moment before the outlaw's lips moved. "Better pull my boots off," he said slowly. "I'm done for."

A glance was enough to assure the marshal that Rip spoke the truth. "I'm sorry —you getting it this way. This damn fool ——"

"One way or another, I had it comin' to me," Rip got out weakly. "I ain't kickin'."

"Get his boots off," Heck barked at Chilton. "Be easy about it, too!" Beneath his iron exterior he was overwhelmed by his debt to the dying man. He knew Rip had only seconds to go. They had always been on the opposite sides of the fence. That was forgotten now. Whatever else Rip Yeager was, he had found him a man.

"I wish I could do something for you ——"

"There's nothin'," Rip whispered, all the hardness gone from his face. "That cup —I bought for the baby; I suppose it's back in the car."

"No, I got it in my pocket," Heck lied valiantly.

"Yeh?" Rip smiled. "I—I wish you'd see that he gets it, Heck——"

"I will," Heck promised, his voice husky. "He'll have his silver cup, all right."

EXIT EXHIBIT A

I WAS sheriff of Butte County, South Dakota, when the railroad come in, and made Belle Fourche the largest cattle and wool shipping point in the world. It shore was a tough country. Cattle men were fightin' sheep, and sheep men were fightin' cattle, and rustlers were preyin' on both, with once in a while road agents to make things more lively. To the south, the gold camps of the Hills were drawing a lot of mighty hard characters. Butte County covered the whole northwestern quarter of the state, and was a whole lot bigger than most eastern states, and bein' so handy to the Wyoming and Montana lines, we had to have an agreement with the officers on the other side of the line. If our posses did forget about a state boundary once in a while and follow some rustlers over to the Devil's Tower or Piniele, why, we was willin' to return the favor the next time some Wyoming or Montana bad men come over our way, and nothin' was ever heard of it in the capitols. Them

western neighbors of ours had some blamed good officers, too, and we worked together more than once. But it was too big a country, and it did seem we never could get it quieted down.

The Hashknife was one of the biggest cow outfits in this part of the country, and I had my hands full keepin' their young punchers from makin' their own law when they caught up with rustlers. In fact, and to be honest, I didn't waste no time makin' a fuss if I happened to be up Cave Hills way, when some undesirable citizens were found strung up to the cottonwoods over on the Redwater in the other end of the county. But I never could stand for any foolishness of that sort when I was along, and it was that fact that got me into the jam I am talking about.

The rustlers was worse than usual, and the Hashknife was the worst sufferer. Sometimes whole bunches of dogies was run off, and, again, it would be just a few head, butchered for the market and peddled on the sly. The few nesters in the country had no sympathy for the big outfits, and were not particular whose beef they bought, so long as it was fresh and cheap. In fact, we felt sure that some of them were among the rustlers, and there was one bunch over on Indian Creek that I was mighty anxious to catch with the goods. I knowed what they was doin', but knowin' ain't provin', and I was just layin' low and waitin' my chance, when one night I got a tip that a small bunch of Hashknife steers had been cut out, and was bein' moved over toward the Montana line. I got two or three of the boys in a hurry, and we stopped at Indian Creek at daylight, and picked up half a dozen of the Hashknife punchers, after me tellin' them mighty plain that if we had any luck, we were to bring our men into Belle for a trial. They kicked, of course, but, in the end, they gave in, mostly because I hadn't give them any information, and they hadn't been let in on the tip.

We picked up the trail easy enough; it looked like about fifty head, and we made a hard day's ride, as I wanted to catch them before they got over into the Montana breaks, and scattered. We had a piece of luck late that day, runnin' into a herd of ponies the JHW was bringin' across from Powder River, and, of course, they was glad to let us swap for fresh horses. Even then, we lost ground durin' the night, and next mornin' we come to the edge of the brakes, where it was useless to follow, and were just about to give it up, when we rose over a little rise, and seen a lone puncher skinnin' a beef down towards the end of a little coulee. He didn't see us yet and some of the boys circled around and rode at him from the other end. His pony was grazin' some distance away, and he couldn't get to it, but it didn't matter anyway, as we saw afterwards that it had a lame foot. Of course, we knowed that this puncher had dropped out when his pony went lame, and had killed one of the steers for meat while the rest of the bunch pushed on ahead. Evidently they didn't know we was on the trail. This lad had plenty of nerve, for he went right on with his work as we rode up; fact is, he seemed to be workin' faster than ordinary, and paid no 'tention to us at all, till we throwed down on him. Then he got to his feet, with his hands in the air, and an impudent grin on his face. I knowed him; Tex Watson was his name, and I had been suspectin' him for a long time.

"Look it over, boys," he said. "You ain't got nothin' on me."

WELL, we thought different, but after I lifted his gun, and put the cuffs on him, we found he was right. That young devil had skinned the whole brand off the critter's right side, right where the Hashknife belonged, and that piece of hide shore was gone. No wonder he had been so busy when he seen us ridin' up. We looked and we looked. It was a pretty fair sized piece of hide, as you could guess, but he shore had hid it. We cussed him, and hunted, and then we hunted some more, and cussed him while we was huntin'. He got a good kick out of it, and done nothin'

but grin. He shore stood on his constitutional rights, as the lawyers say.

The more the boys hunted, the madder they got, and Bill LaFors, the Hashknife foreman, made some mighty pointed remarks about the general damfoolishness of takin' such a so-and-so in for a trial that we couldn't win without that brand, especially as there was some trees not an hour's ride away. Naturally his outfit was ready to back him up. The Hashknife wasn't a bunch of saints, by no means. It wasn't so long before that they had rode into Rapid City, and shot the marshal, and they was a tough bunch to argue with. But my men stood pat, and we took this lad back to Belle Fourche. He didn't even get a lawyer. He was smart, and he jest showed the judge that he couldn't be convicted without the brand for evidence to prove it wasn't his own critter he had killed. Everybody knowed he never owned a hoof himself, but although His Honor was jest as sure as anyone else that the steer had come from that bunch lifted from the Hashknife, he could only do one thing, and he throwed the case out of court. Tex thumbed his nose at us when he was turned loose.

Well, you can guess how we got kidded, especially me, as the cowmen all felt that I should have shut my eyes, and let nature take its course instead of bein' so law-abidin'. However, this lad did leave the country, and a few weeks after that while I was up in Deadwood as a witness in Federal Court, some of the same punchers started out after rustlers that had got pretty bold up in the Moreau River country, and when they come back, they didn't bring no prisoners and rustlin' activities weren't so noticeable for a time.

Well, that's about all there is to it, except that a couple of years later I had an errand over to the Bighorn country, and on the way I rode up to a ranch on the Little Missouri to spend the night. As I come up to the corral, here was a young feller saddlin' a bronc, and I knowed him right away. He knowed me, too, and I seen that same old grin.

"Hello, Sheriff," he says. "Found any lost brands lately?"

I had to grin, too, for it was a horse on me, all right, and besides, I wanted to ask him a question.

"Tex," says I, "now it's all over and gone, just tell me. What in hell went with that piece of hide?"

"Well, Sheriff," he says, "bygones is bygones, and there's no hard feelin's on my part. When I seen you boys ridin' up, I thought I was a goner. But I got an idea, and I worked on it, faster than hell. I skinned out that brand. Then I rolled it up as tight as could be, opened up that steer's mouth, and stuck the hide down the throat as far as my hand would reach. I even had time to push it further with the butt end of my quirt which was lyin' handy, instead of bein' on my saddle. I knowed I was safe, and all I had to do was to keep quiet, and grin."

We shook hands.

Dick Hughes

C-Men

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Last Spark," "The Deaf Man," and Other Stories of Stan Dvorak of Para-Art

Chapter I

SNATCHED

THE black sedan with the Iowa license, the dusty camp gear packed on the luggage carrier and fenders, attracted no attention as it rolled into Mill City. Middle Western auto tourists usually took a swing through the heavily timbered Olympic Peninsula country when in the Puget Sound area. And often a grim visaged man sat behind the steering wheel.

A Civilian Conservation Corps boy from Iowa crossed the street, with the idea of inquiring about affairs at home. The car moved ahead just fast enough to avoid him. The well-bred purring of the motor hinted at great horse power and perfect timing. The sedan turned down a side street, ran along the waterfront and swung easily onto an old wharf. It slowed up when within a hundred feet of three Para-Art cameras photographing two men engaged in a terrific fight on a log boom.

Moe Ganz, Para-Art's producer shuddered as the impact of fist against a jaw came sharply. "Phooie, such a wallop!" he exclaimed. "I esk you how can flesh and blood stand it such treatment."

"It's great stuff, Moe," Boren Bilderback the director exclaimed. "Those two loggers aren't pulling their punches."

Moe beamed. "Nice young men," he

It Was C-Men as Well as G-Men Who Went into Action When Moe Ganz of Para-Art Disappeared

observed. "And if all do it so well, may be our tree picture, Cedar Shingles, will get three or four stars."

While shooting "The Last Spark" in the Sequoia National Forest two potential stars had emerged from the ranks—Tom Shannon, a CCC man, and Rita Hamilton. When Moe began looking for a story to fit the pair someone had suggested the cedar shingle industry. It was an idea that met the producer's approval and he had accompanied the cast to Puget Sound to personally supervise the work.

With him to play the rôle of Sven Sverdrug, a logger crippled by a rolling log, was Stan Dvorak, Para-Art's great character actor.

The black sedan turned around, then backed until it was concealed by a shed. Two brisk individuals stepped from the car and boldly approached the cameras. A dozen actors and assistants were standing back of the cameras, intently watching the fight on the log boom. There was no sound save the soft whine of camera motors and the grunts of the struggling men.

THE brisk pair stopped directly behind Moe Ganz who was standing on a box behind the group. One of them suddenly sprang to action. His big right hand clapped across Moe's mouth. His left arm encircled the little Jew's body and lifted him lightly from the box. A submachine gun slid from under his companion's coat, but it was not needed. The pair and their half smothered victim were around the shed before a head turned.

A small boy, rowing a boat, suddenly rested on his oars and stared in pop-eyed astonishment. "Hey, whatcha doin'?" he shrilly demanded. The gunner lifted his weapon and a crooked finger tightened on the machine gun trigger.

"Hold it!" his companion sharply ordered, then to the boy, "Get back. This is a motion picture and you're getting into it."

"Oh!" The boy hastily backed water. An instant later the door slammed and the sedan rolled smoothly away.

A gasping voice trailed from the sedan, "Phooie! I esk, what kind of a business is this?"

"It's a snatch, Ganz," the gunner rasped, "and your family is going to dig up a hundred grand—or else."

BOREN BILDERBACH crisply ordered, "Cut!" Then he lifted his megaphone. "That's great, boys. Just as good a fight scene as I've ever directed. Come off the boom and let the studio doctor patch you up." Without turning he added, "Moe, what do you think of it?"

There was no answer. Bilderbach looked surprised and shot a glance at Stan Dvorak. "Where'd the boss go? I never knew him to quit a fight scene."

"He was all steamed up a few minutes ago—claimed it would make a four star picture," Dvorak answered. He walked around the shed, then continued to the edge of the wharf. "He wouldn't leave without saying something." A surge of fear gripped his body. "He couldn't have slipped and fallen in!"

"He isn't on the wharf," Bilderbach shouted.

"You didn't see a little man around here did you?" Dvorak asked the boy in the boat.

"Two guys in a black sedan grabbed him," the boy answered. "One waved a gun at me, but the other said it was a motion picture and for me to get back."

"A black sedan!" Bilderbach exclaimed.

"I saw it," Dvorak said. "It came up and turned around just as the fight scene started. I thought it was someone who wanted to see us work. You don't suppose——?"

"I'm thinking the same thing—a snatch!" the director exclaimed. "We'd better put the highway patrol on the job."

"Just a minute," Dvorak said. "What's that stuck on the shed wall?"

A slip of white paper fluttered from a thumb tack. Dvorak tore the paper free and read:

"Para-Art Company:

Moe Ganz will be returned unharmed providing you pay us the following:

3,000 twenty dollar notes.

3,000 ten dollar notes.

2,000 five dollar notes.

Notes to be Federal Reserve Bank, worn from circulation. New notes won't be accepted. If the police, G-Men or newspapers are notified we will bury the old man so deep he won't get out on judgment day. We have planned this to the smallest detail and there will be no slips on our part. We know it is the noose for us if we make a mistake and are thinking only of ourselves. So, obey orders. You will be notified within ten days where to meet us with the money.

Lifer."

"Lifer, eh?" Dvorak muttered as he finished reading. "He probably holds life damned cheap. I think we had better go a little easy on this. I can raise a hundred thousand in 'federal reserve notes worn from circulation!'"

"And when Moe's safe you'll proceed to run the gang down and collect your hundred thousand and a scalp or two," Bilderbach drawled.

"Naturally a man isn't going to let loose of a hundred grand without a protest," Dvorak admitted. There was a bright gleam in his eye at the prospect of matching wits with a desperate gang. "I suppose I had better send a confidential telegram to my banker and have the money sent air express. Then we'll be ready."

"The one quick way to kill the snatch racket," Bilderbach ventured, "is to take the profit out of it, and yet——"

"—when somebody close to you is involved, you're going to pay." the actor interrupted. He drove to the Commercial Hotel to remove his make-up and emerge as John Stanley, wealthy young man who played around with the motion picture crowd.

THE fires of resentment burned furiously in Moe Ganz's frail body. He resented the sudden attack in the midst

of production and he resented lying on a sedan floor covered with a dusty automobile robe. "Phooie!" he exclaimed. "Snatchin' ain't a business. It's torture. On my bended knees I esk, give me some fresh air. Phooie!"

"You ought to know whether it's a business or not," the gunner sneered. "Para-Art made a couple of snatch pictures. In fact we got our ideas from one of your pictures."

"Phooie! My chickens come home to roost, already." Handcuffs held his wrists tightly together, but he had an idea he

might free himself, because his hands were small. "But, Mr. Snatcher, the joke's on you. Nobody'll give you a dime for Papa Moe. Para-Art? They've insured me by a million dollars cash money. And sooner they'd have a million cash than Moe Ganz."

"A million dollars insurance," the gunner repeated. "That's fine! The insurance company will probably pay us a hundred grand to save a thousand grand."

Moe knew by the high-pitched hum of the motor that the car was rolling over the open highway. Suddenly it slowed down and the body swayed. "Rounding a turn," Moe muttered. "And here comes it another car. I hear the horn."

He pulled a hand free and, leaping up, tried to open the door and jump out. The gunner grasped a short length of gas pipe and crashed it down on Moe's head. The hand clutching the door handle trembled, then relaxed. A shudder ran through his frame—life appeared to drain from the body. "Hell, don't croak him," Lifer warned.

"What's the difference?" the gunner argued. "We don't plan to turn him loose anyway."

"You're right, dead men tell no tales," Lifer said, "but Para-Art or the insurance company may want to see him *alive* before they come across with the money!"

"They may want proof, but they won't insist," the gunner contended. "They'll be anxious; will come across and hope for the best."

The car turned into a straight stretch again and the speedometer hovered between eighty and ninety, then slid back to forty as the highway twisted through the mountains.

TWENTY miles away Donnybrook McDuff of the Indian River Civilian Conservation Corps contingent, burst from a cabin where he had been receiving orders over a Forest Service telephone. "Hey, you mugs!" he yelled at a truckload of CCC boys. "While I was telephoning, somebody cut in and said they'd just passed a speeding black sedan down on the highway. A man who looked like Moe Ganz suddenly tried to open the door and was smacked down by a tough looking bird. It looked like a kidnapping to them."

"So what?" one of his companions asked. "That's a job for G-men. We are C-Men, as you might say."

"None of your smart cracks," McDuff retorted in a dangerous voice.

The other subsided. McDuff's fighting ability was on a par with that displayed by participants in the famous Donnybrook Fairs. And the ability had won him his nickname. Six feet tall, broad shouldered and weighing close to two hundred pounds, he could take care of himself in any company. Even in the free-for-all loggers fights he had given a good account of himself. "But what's this snatching to us?" one of them asked.

"Just this," Donnybrook explained. "Para-Art gave the CCC a swell break in the picture, The Last Spark. Tom Shannon, a CCC boy was given a good part, and now he plays the lead in the Cedar

shingle picture. Moe promised to shoot the mob scenes on Saturdays and Sundays when we're off duty so we can pick up money as extras. He's a good guy and if they've snatched him, we're going to do something about it."

"Damned right, Donnybrook," Dynamite Jim Kelly agreed. And others nodded. Because he dynamited the CCC trucks over the dangerous mountain roads, Kelly had also been appropriately nicknamed. Donnybrook and Dynamite Jim made a sweet pair, though the latter stood but five feet six inches and weighed a hundred and thirty pounds when sopping wet. But his lack in weight and inches was made up in a granite jaw, reckless mouth, appraising blue eyes and a shock of red hair.

"Ganz must have resisted," Dynamite mused. "If he gets a half a chance——"

"Which he won't," Donnybrook cut in. "They've got a million dollars worth of motion picture producer and know it." He sized up his companions and was satisfied with the result. They were hard, fit, bronzed and bright-eyed. The same breed in the Foreign Legion leaves its bones in the shifting sands when it doesn't come home with medals on its breast.

"Hey you, Lug," Dynamite said to Donnybrook, "what's on your mind? From the gleam in your eyes I'd say you're wondering what C-Men can do until G-Men get on the job."

"That's it," Donnybrook admitted. "In the first place, the G-Men, as a matter of policy, will give Para-Art a chance to pay the ransom and get Ganz back safe and sound before they move in."

"My guess is they won't leave the Peninsula with him," Dynamite said after a moment's reflection. "Too much chance of getting caught by a Coast Guard cutter on the Sound, or a posse blocking the roads."

"Have you any other *guesses?*" Donnybrook stressed the word and shot a significant glance at the redhead. He knew Dynamite Jim had driven a getaway car for an Eastern mob and was familiar with the mental processes of underworld characters both when planning a job and when cornered.

"My other guess is they'll let Ganz write a note or talk over the telephone to prove he's alive. The ransom will then be paid and they'll bump him off, because it's safest for them. The set-up here is perfect for holding a man then murdering him. It is also a perfect set-up for a getaway." With a sweep of his hand he indicated the peninsula.

HIS hand included what is literally and geographically the last West. As the crow flies, it is roughly eighty miles from the southerly tip of Puget Sound to Port Townsend; a hundred miles from that point westward to the Pacific. From the southerly tip of the Sound, westward to the sea it is sixty-five miles.

A highway, never far from salt water, runs around the peninsula. Small communities huddle along the shoreline, but the remainder is forests, mountains that rear suddenly thousands of feet, brawling rivers, game and remote valleys touched only by faint trails and more often not at all.

Countless inlets, bays and coves would permit Lifer and his companions to escape by motor boat or plane. A million men might search the wilderness and fail to locate Moe's hidden grave. And there were no neighbors—as so often happens in the city—to report mysterious people moving in next door.

Moe Ganz would vanish completely and the sole connecting link with the loggers and the outer world—unless he escaped—would be his captors dickering for ransom money.

"Let's get down onto the highway," Donnybrook suddenly suggested. "We'll stop every car and if they squawk we'll claim we're working on the road."

Three minutes later Dynamite Jim jammed on the brakes and his companions unloaded. One of them set up a red flag at the first reverse curve; the others, except McDuff, scattered along the highway and made a fine show of clearing up debris.

An ancient car from Nebraska slowed up for the red flag and was waved on by Donnybrook. The next car swung around the curve so suddenly, yet so silently, the CCC man was caught completely by surprise. "Iowa sedan!" Donnybrook exclaimed, recalling that such a car had been mentioned on the telephone. "Just a minute please," he said, "and we'll have the road clear on the next turn."

A hard glitter came into the driver's eyes and suddenly the exhaust fairly blasted. The car leaped ahead so swiftly that McDuff narrowly escaped being run down.

"That's them, sure as hell," Dynamite yelled. "There was something in back covered with a robe." He slid in behind the wheel of the CCC truck and yelled for the others to climb aboard. "I know a short cut, if it isn't blocked by down timber. We might head 'em off."

"Then what?" one of them asked.

"May be a good fairy will come along and tell us what to do," Dynamite retorted with fine sarcasm.

In low gear the truck climbed the hill, roared along a narrow bench and began the descent. The best driver in the CCC opened the throttle wide. "Mud hole at the bottom," he warned. "Got to hit her hard or we'll be stuck."

"If you don't turn the whole lay-out over on the way down," Donnybrook yelled. He clung to the seat, while those in the truck body hung to anything substantial. Black muck, dotted with skunk cabbages loomed ahead. There was a faint trace of wheel marks and a sheet of stagnant water covered with green scum. The truck hit, a sheet of water flooded the windshield, then the wheels began spinning. "Everybody out and heave!" Dynamite ordered.

While they pushed he fed power slowly and avoided spinning wheels. As the rear tires gripped hard ground, the truck jumped ahead in low gear. Knee deep in mud, the others were left flat. "I'll pick you up later," he called back. "No time now." Donnybrook McDuff, reasoning something like this might happen, had jumped aboard as the front wheels reached firm ground.

"Are you sure the boys won't be needed at the next mudhole?" he asked.

"No more mudholes. I know every hole by its first name," Dynamite retorted. "Hang on!" They struck the next turn on two wheels and roared into a switchback, with brakes on and motor running against the compression. Twice Donnybrook got ready to jump, but each time, by a miracle, the red-head tooled the truck to safety.

They thundered past a stop sign and onto the highway a hundred feet behind the black sedan. "You can't catch him now," Donnybrook warned. "He's got all the power in the world."

"It isn't power, it's driving that counts in the mountains," Dynamite retorted.

Indignant motorists in ditches proved the sedan to be putting traffic off the road. The driver took the turns wide and Dynamite took them wider. Twice in the next five miles Dynamite closed in on the sedan, then slowed down. "We haven't anything to fight with," he complained, "or we'd move in."

"Trail them," Donnybrook advised, "until somebody comes along. The highway patrol should be in action by now. You don't think they'll harm Ganz, do you?"

"No," Dynamite answered, "he's safe as long as they're liable to be caught with him on their hands. Under the Lindbergh law a snatcher can't be hanged if the victim is unharmed. In this state it's different, though—it's a capital offense."

As the sedan speeded up, he opened the throttle wide. Rubber skidded around the turns, whining dismally and the truck almost rolled over. Swinging into a reverse curve Dynamite suddenly yelled, "Duck!"

Sensing the CCC men's strategy, those in the sedan had determined to check it. The driver had slowed down and while Lifer slid back a glass panel in the rear, Gunner opened up with a tommy gun. He aimed squarely at Dynamite Kelly as the truck thundered into view.

A rough spot in the pavement was all that saved him. Jets of concrete spurted up as the bullets struck a few feet in front of the wheels. The leaden spray lifted, then swung slightly. Both front tires burst and went into a violent shimmy. Dynamite, expecting a second burst that would wipe him out, struggled valiantly in an effort to keep the truck on the road. "Jump, you lug!" he yelled at Donnybrook.

The truck smashed through a guard rail, rolled over, then the top crashed in as it struck a stump a hundred feet down a steep slope. Fifty feet below the stump it brought up against a four foot thick fir tree. A terrible silence followed.

Chapter II

WARNING

DONNYBROOK McDUFF rubbed his head and looked about in bewilderment. "I guess I'm O. K.," he growled, "I jumped and landed squarely in the air three feet beyond the edge of the grade."

"I was thrown out," Dynamite replied. "Nothing seems to be busted, but we sure did wash out the truck. Another thing, I know the baby behind that tommy gun—he blotted out one of my best friends.

And——" He paused and scratched his head. "And I think he recognized me. If he did, he'll do something about it."

The two climbed up the bank to the highway, discussing what had happened and to consider what must be done. "If we're going to move in on those babies, Donnybrook," Dynamite said, "you'd better take over the leadership. I'm O. K. behind the wheel or in a fight, but I'm no leader and I've sense enough to know it."

"We lost our hot trail," Donnybrook grumbled. "Shooting the tires turned the trick."

"That gunner is a big shot in an Eastern mob," Dynamite said slowly. "The G-Men scattered it. The boys gathered here and are trying to make a quick turnover before the G-Men catch up with them. Like as not they're down to their last grand."

"Down to the last grand?" Donnybrook jeered. "Wouldn't I like that experience."

"It's serious to men whose take runs better than a hundred grand a year per each," Dynamite said. "If I'd known that gunner was in the car I'd of taken those turns easier and not driven into hot lead. Listen—a car's coming. And they're sure dynamiting it."

The car skidded to a stop when Donnybrook raised his hand. "It's that John Stanley, the rich cuss who plays around with the picture crowd," he said in a low tone.

"Him, eh?" Dynamite's disgust was obvious. "Why couldn't it have been Stan Dvorak? Now there's a man!"

"Did you see a black sedan——?" Stanley began.

"We saw it and chased it," Donnybrook interrupted. "A burst of machine gun bullets in the front tires ended the chase." He nodded his head towards the wreckage, then related what they knew.

"That's the tread we're to look for," Dvorak said, glancing at the tread marks left by the sedan. "New rubber, too."

"They usually use new rubber," Dynamite observed. "And in case you don't know it, that's Lifer's gang."

"We know it," Dvorak replied. "They left a ransom note."

"Remember this," Dynamite warned—"if you have any influence with the Para-Art crowd, tell them not to pay a dime until Ganz is safe in their hands. Otherwise they'll take the money and blot the old man out. Plain talk, but it's the truth."

Sirens echoing flatly through the big timber heralded the approach of police cars. Two motorcycles with sidecars roared to a stop. Husky, sun-burned men with young

faces and old eyes hurried up. "State highway patrolmen," Donnybrook said. "Did you meet a black sedan——?"

"Hell yes! Two miles down the road. We found a length of gas pipe and quite a pool of blood. We're holding the pipe for finger prints."

"Not a chance," Dynamite said briefly. "That mob wears gloves to bed."

One of the patrolmen stared long and hard at the CCC man. "Let's have a profile view of your mug," he said. Dynamite obediently turned. "Hmmmm! I've seen your face in the Bureau of Investigation, Seattle. Bill Adams showed me the record."

"Probably," Dynamite admitted. "I drove the getaway car for the Selover gang —until I could drive the man who framed my brother into a police ambush. You know where to find me if you want to go deeper into the case."

"I've plenty to do right here," the patrolman answered, and search in the vicinity soon revealed the sedan, abandoned. Undoubtedly it had been stolen from some Iowa tourist party. The car into which the Lifer crowd had transferred left no clue.

WHILE Donnybrook and the officers talked with Dvorak, Dynamite located a telephone and called the Indian River CCC camp and related what had transpired. "Somebody will have to get a truck and pick up some of the boys. They'll be somewhere between the mud hole and highway. Donnybrook and I will string along with John Stanley and the officers if it's all right."

"Go ahead," the officer in charge of the camp ordered.

A sheriff and deputy marshal had joined the group when Dynamite returned. "There're only two roads leading off the peninsula," the sheriff was saying, "one by the way of Shelton and the other through Aberdeen. Block those roads and we've put a cork in both necks of the bottle." He rubbed his hands with enthusiasm. "If the Coast Guard will watch the straits and Sound for speed boats and the land officers check the automobile ferries we'll clear up this case in a hurry."

"Don't pay a dime until you get Ganz back alive," Dynamite repeated. He was determined to harp on that point if necessary.

THEY all drove to Mill City, found Bilderbach already there and all held a conference at the Commercial Hotel. "Lay off, please," Dvorak pleaded with the officers, "until we get the old man back alive. I'll have the money ready."

Donnybrook felt from their actions that John Stanley did not draw very much water with the police. However, the CCC man sensed Stanley was more than a playboy. He was born to command and there was a shrewdness in his eyes and a decisiveness of manner that interested him. "Now if we had this man Dvorak," one of the officers said, "it might help out. He's quite a detective from what I've heard."

"Mr. Dvorak is not available," the man known as John Stanley said. "We'll have to do the best we can."

The telephone of their room rang suddenly and a voice demanded, "Let me speak to Dvorak or Bilderbach."

The director answered the telephone, surprised that their whereabouts had become known so soon. "This is Lifer, speaking," a crisp voice snapped. "So you called the cops and G-Men after we warned you what would happen if you did."

"Just a minute," Bilderbach desperately explained, "somebody, passing, saw you hit Moe Ganz and turned in a police alarm. How is he?"

"Never mind. I'm tellin' you, not answerin' questions," the other snapped. "We ain't showin' our hand until it's safe. And *we'll* know when it's safe. Then you'll be given your orders."

"We'll have the money," Bilderbach promised. "But we've got to know whether Ganz is safe."

"We're dictatin' the terms," Lifer said

harshly, "or else—— You know what that means—you've used it in your pictures plenty."

"Whoever it is, don't pay a dime to the gonoffs!" Moe Ganz's shrill voice came suddenly over the instrument. "Not a red cent. I said so in my picture, Snatchers. And I say it again now. Phooie, for the rats—phoo——" The impact of fist against flesh came sharply.

"Take the kike out of here," Lifer ordered. And with that he slammed up the receiver.

"Damn!" Dvorak panted. He stared at the telephone and was moved to break Ganz's iron rule against revealing his identity to the public. In the end he thought better of it. If the world did not know what Stan Dvorak looked like, then he had just that much advantage in his operations against the underworld.

The sheriff who had joined them called the telephone office. "Operator, where did that call come from?" he asked sharply.

The operators in logging town exchanges know the source of most calls and can recognize the majority of their subscriber's voices. "The call came over the Forest Service line," the girl answered.

"A hell of a help that is," Donnybrook muttered, and the others understood. A Forest Service line is strung from tree to tree over a vast area. Branch wires extend to numerous cabins and even to stations housed in boxes nailed to trees. A call might come from any station and there was no way of determining the location. In addition to that, the wire could be tapped almost anywhere.

"Lifer probably knows all about Forest Service phones," Dynamite said. "He'd never make the mistake of talking that long over a city phone."

"I wish you wood ticks would shut up," the sheriff said testily. "Anybody would think you were G-Men."

"No," Donnybrook retorted, "not G-Men, just C-Men." He motioned Dvorak and Dynamite to another room. "Say, Mr. Stanley," he said to the actor, "you seem to have influence with Para-Art. And you've sent for the ransom money, so may be you'll help us out."

"Go ahead," Dvorak replied.

"Let us C-Men have a shot at this. We know Ganz is on the peninsula. We aren't forgetting what a swell break he gave the CCC in the Last Spark picture, and we want to do something."

"What?" Dvorak asked in a practical voice.

"Well," Donnybrook explained, "CCC camps are scattered over the entire peninsula. That means we can blanket every road and trail. The snatchers couldn't move without passing a wood tick. Sooner or later we'll pick up a clue. One thing is certain, if the snatchers think they're going to be caught, they'll be careful about killing Ganz."

"That's right," Dynamite agreed. "The real danger to him will follow payment of the ransom. Do what you can to give us a break, won't you?"

"I'll see what I can do," Dvorak promised. "Go ahead with your plans, but remember, you're to do nothing that will endanger Ganz's life."

Dvorak left them, his own mood thoughtful. "They're right," he mused. "They can blanket the country and sooner or later pick up the snatchers' trail. Man! Man! Wouldn't I like to be a CCC boy for a while."

Chapter III

Another Tough Mug

"WHAT are the orders for the day?" Dynamite asked Donnybrook several mornings later.

"Which orders do you mean?" Donnybrook asked, "orders as C-Men working on the Ganz case, or orders as CCC men, building trails in the Olympic National Forest?"

"Both," Dynamite replied.

"As CCC men we are to keep right along building that trail," Donnybrook explained. "As C-Men we are standing by waiting for

the break in the case. You, personally, are to start the day by running down to Mill City and picking up a new guy." Donnybrook consulted a slip. "His name is Roughhouse Dugan. He's a transfer from an Oregon camp and he's to be your helper."

"Donnybrook McDuff, Roughhouse Dugan and Dynamite Jim Kelly," the latter muttered, "what a fine trio for a brawl."

"Great," Donnybrook agreed, "providing they don't start fighting amongst themselves."

Kelly drove towards Mill City and several hours later he returned with a dark haired individual who could only have originated in Ireland. He lacked McDuff's powerful build, but there was a swiftness of movement and a steel-trap decisiveness about him that bespoke hidden physical and mental powers not apparent in a casual inspection.

Dynamite had been moved to start a fight with the newcomer on the way out. "I got to rubbing it in while loading the truck," he informed Donnybrook. "See this spot on my jaw? The red lump? That's where he smacked me down. I went out cold. We're going to get along just fine with the likes of him."

"What about John Stanley, Bilderbach and the others?" Donnybrook inquired.

"I didn't see Stanley," Dynamite answered. "He was away somewhere. But Bilderbach has parked by a telephone and he stays with it twenty-four hours of the day, waiting for the snatchers to contact him. He's beginning to look sick from worry and helplessness. The town is full of G-Men, but they're laying off until the ransom is paid. Lifer's crowd has them spotted, no doubt. And that's why we C-Men have the edge in this case."

"How about this Roughhouse Dugan?" Donnybrook asked.

"He knows all about it. I told him about us chasing the snatch car and you could tell by the gleam of his eye he wished he'd been along. He's got some ideas," Dynamite said. "I told him our boys were checking on every car and human that moved over a trail."

"Tell him and his ideas to come along with us," Donnybrook directed.

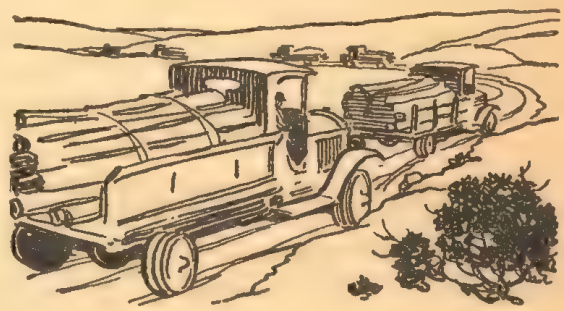
The three of them sat on the truck seat and after a moment's silence Dugan said, "With the snatchers worrying about G-men and state officers, they won't be thinking about C-Men."

"Exactly," Donnybrook agreed. "Go on. You've got something on your mind."

"Wait until I get through this mudhole," Dynamite said. He eased in the low gear and stepped on the throttle. The truck wallowed through the muck.

"That mud has a rusty appearance," the newcomer, Roughhouse, observed. "There must be an iron deposit near by."

"So you noticed that too," Dynamite said. "I know every mudhole on this part



of the peninsula by its first name. They *are* different. So what?"

"We'll come to that later," Roughhouse replied. "Suppose we'd encounter the gang now. What would happen?"

"They'd shoot us, or our tires full of holes," Dynamite said gloomily. "What we should have is a machine gun."

"I asked a few questions while in Mill City," Roughhouse informed them. "It strikes me now is the time to prepare for the showdown when it comes. Would you mind turning down an old road to the left, two miles from here?"

FIFTEEN minutes later Dynamite brought the truck to a stop in an abandoned logging camp. "I think we'll find everything needed right here," said Roughhouse, who seemed to have an amaz-

ing knowledge of the country. "How much time have we?"

"The rest of the day," Donnybrook informed him, and seemed content to let the newcomer take charge of the situation.

"Good, let's get to work!" Roughhouse said with enthusiasm. His first move was to repair a bellows in the blacksmith shop and build a fire in the forge. Later he prowled around a junk heap until he found what he was looking for. While this was going on, Dynamite worked on the truck motor.

At sundown the work was completed. "There she is," Dynamite said with pardonable pride. "This motor is so souped up it can stay with anything on these mountain roads. And Roughhouse's ideas just about complete the picture."

The trio continued with their usual duties in the days that followed. Rumors flew thick and fast. There were some who claimed the Ganz ransom had been paid, but the prisoner was not released because he had been murdered. Others argued Ganz had been killed in an attempt to escape.

Boren Bilderbach said nothing and remained close to the telephone. Then suddenly his attitude changed. His tenseness vanished and he actually smiled. A CCC man working in Mill City telephoned Donnybrook McDuff. "They've received some kind of word," he said, "and the Para-Art director is ready to go places."

Donnybrook lost no time in getting in touch with the director. "Something's in the wind, Mr. Bilderbach. Remember, don't pay over the money until you see Ganz alive and free."

"Ganz is alive and well," Bilderbach answered. "He'll be freed on payment of the ransom. I have Lifer's word on that."

"He won't be freed in a thousand years if you pay that money," Dynamite desperately insisted. "I know that crowd."

"Good God!" Bilderbach cried. "Would you have me juggle with the old man's life?" He paced the room. "I've got my orders."

"Sure, you've got your orders," agreed Dynamite who of course was present.

The two left, parked their truck in a vacant lot and registered at a rooming house where Roughhouse Dugan awaited them. Bilderbach's car, parked behind the hotel, was visible from their window. "We'll take turns watching things," Donnybrook said. "When the time comes, it's one of you two mugs who will have to get into Bilderbach's luggage compartment. I'm too large. It's going to take some twisting out of shape to turn the trick."

"I'll try it," Roughhouse volunteered.

At one o'clock he aroused them from a sound sleep. "A light just went on in Bilderbach's window," he said. "I'm starting my part right now. You fellows know your job."

Donnybrook and Dynamite hastily dressed, climbed onto the truck and drove quietly to the nearest Forest Service telephone. The former called the Indian River CCC camp. "There's a fire in the Dry Creek country," he announced, "wake up the boys and tell them to stand by. The rangers may need them if the blaze gets out of control."

It was a signal previously agreed on and calculated to deceive any of the Lifer gang that might be listening on a tapped wire. But it was a signal that sent men to watch every road and trail in the area. "And now comes the tough part for us," Donnybrook said gloomily. "We've got to sit here and wait for something to happen."

WHILE his companions carried out their duties, Roughhouse twisted himself into the luggage trunk of Bilderbach's car and closed down the door. "A little of this will go a long way," he grumbled, as he plugged the lock to keep it from snapping shut. "It isn't as large as I expected it would be."

A few minutes later Bilderbach drove away. He was alone and his pace was leisurely; seemingly he did not know exactly where he was going. Roughhouse opened the door a crack and watched the

tree tops fade into the starry sky. Counting the turns the car made, he was able to get something of the general direction.

The car swayed into a gravel road and ran nearly two miles, then slowed down. Suddenly it stopped at a narrow bridge spanning a small creek. A small, black bag thudded to the planks, then the car speeded up. As it rounded the first turn, Roughhouse climbed out, rode the bumper briefly, then unloaded. He dived into the brush, somewhat scratched and bruised, but lost no time turning back. He followed a game trail to the creek, and cautiously studied the situation. The black bag lay on its side, from which Roughhouse concluded the gang would be along.

Roughhouse's only weapon was a heavy, pulp board box filled with carefully selected pieces of broken beer bottles. He displayed almost loving care in scattering the glass across the road, a hundred yards from the bridge. This done, he raced to the nearest forest telephone and called Donnybrook. "We're going to need a truckload of men to handle this blaze," he said. "And say, pick up the reel of hose cached at the Lost Creek cutoff. Remember, don't come without the hose." Roughhouse was emphatic on that point.

The hum of a powerful motor and the grind of rubber against gravel sounded as Roughhouse made his way through the timber. He paused and listened, with rapidly beating heart. The car slowed down, wheels rumbled on the bridge, then the hum changed to the mounting whine of a suddenly gunned motor.

"They picked up the bag," Roughhouse exclaimed. He listened and was rewarded by the report of an exploding tire. "And they picked up a piece of glass, too." The motor died off as if the driver planned to stop, then roared again as if someone had ordered him to proceed. "Keep it up and bust a wheel on a rough spot," the listener chuckled.

Perhaps the driver feared the same thing for he stopped. In the deep timber Roughhouse knew a flashlight would not be visible, so he switched it on and raced for the Lost Creek cut-off. The familiar outlines of the truck were faintly visible in the gloom. Breathlessly he climbed into the seat beside Donnybrook and Dynamite. "Step on her," he panted. "The broken glass blew a tire. They stopped to change it. Any reports?"

"Yes, the boys watching the main roads telephoned only three cars have moved since one o'clock. They were all tourists and local folks headed for Seattle. That proves Lifer's car is sticking to back roads," Donnybrook said.

"Who's with us?" Roughhouse asked, nodding his head towards the back.

"Seven of the toughest mugs in our gang," Donnybrook assured him. "And everything is ready. We've got saws, axes, hammers and fallers wedges in case we have to drop a tree across the road."

THEY roared down the road to the bridge, then Roughhouse ran ahead and cleared the glass from the road. "Go slow to the next turn, Dynamite," he directed. "They changed the tire there."

The headlights picked up the skid marks where the flat tire had dug in in stopping. The two jumped down and studied the ground briefly. Roughhouse chuckled. "Now do you know where Lifer's hangout is?" he asked.

"You're doggoned tootin' I do," Dynamite answered. "Somewhere on the Beaver Creek road."

He left the scene with a roar. The instrument board light revealed the set of his jaw and the hard glitter of his eyes. For a moment he was the man who had driven a mob's getaway car. "Listen to that motor turn over," Donnybrook exclaimed. "Did you ever hear anything sweeter?"

"No," Roughhouse answered. "Not even Lifer's car after it had picked up the black bag."

"Thanks," Dynamite said shortly. "Now as I figure it, two of them picked up the bag, and the third stayed to watch Moe Ganz. Now those two are returning to

pick up the guard and—bump off the old man."

Chapter IV

THE BEAVER CREEK ROAD

"HOW do you know you're on the right trail, Dynamite?" one of them asked.

"He knows, old son," Roughhouse assured him.

"One more thing," the voice from the back of the truck insisted. "If that red-headed lug gets stuck in any mudholes, he'll do his own pushing. He made dopes out of us the last time, and once is enough."

"Mud, but no mudholes on this road," Dynamite tossed over his shoulder. "I got stuck six times this summer, so turned across a fern patch and made a road of my own. Black muck, it is, mixed with brake ferns, along with Oregon grape leaves and roots."

"You sure know your mudholes, buddy," the voice admitted.

Ten minutes later Roughhouse jumped down as the truck lurched over soft ground, mixed with vegetation. "Two sets of fresh tire tracks here," he said. "That proves a car has come out of this country and returned since yesterday evening."

As the truck pounded to the crest of the next ridge, the lights dropped suddenly into the gulch below. There was a vague glimpse of a gray sedan, which immediately speeded up. "There she is," Roughhouse yelled. "You fellows flatten out—lead's going to fly! Raise the windshield, we don't want bullet-shattered glass blown all over us."

"Of course bullets won't hurt," one of them jeered.

Up went the windshield, and with it a square of boiler plate reclaimed from the abandoned camp and fitted to the cowl. A wide slot enabled the driver to watch the road ahead. A second plate set at an angle like a battleship turret top protected radiator and motor. Hard tires insured them against blowouts and bullets sending the truck over the grade.

THE gray sedan speeded up, but frequent curves cut down the pace and Dynamite's driving offset the extra speed under the lighter car's cowl. Several minutes elapsed before those ahead realized this was grim pursuit and not a truckload of CCC men bound for a fire. A burst came suddenly from a tommy gun and bullets rattled against the boiler plate. A headlight vanished.

"It'll soon be light," Dynamite shouted. "Besides, we've got one bulb left. Any way, I know this road." The first streaks of day were touching mountain peaks, and light flowed down like a golden fluid.

"Slow down at the next turn," Donnybrook ordered, then he turned to one of those in back. "You Buck, unload. Telephone the G-Men that the C-Men have Lifer's outfit on the run and to get here as quickly as they can."

"Aw hell," Buck protested, "I want to be in on the payoff." Nevertheless he unloaded when Dynamite slowed down.

It was ten minutes before they overhauled the sedan again. The truck hung back, keeping it in sight, but never closing in. Two bursts convinced the occupants the truck could not be stopped. The sedan pulled up abruptly, hoping to trick the truck into exposing its unprotected sides. Dynamite jammed on the brakes.

"Keep under cover," Donnybrook warned. "We've got them guessing, but we're taking no chances. Delay is our hole card." He could appreciate the fury of those in the sedan when they realized their pursuers could stay with them in the mountains, yet would not come close enough for a finish fight.

Suddenly the sedan's strategy changed. "Hell!" Donnybrook yelled, "They're backing up."

"That's something we didn't figure on," a voice exclaimed.

"Put her in reverse," Donnybrook ordered, "or they'll have us cold." He drew

an automatic pistol from a door pocket and blazed away. A bright spot on the sedan proved the bullet had struck steel and glanced.

The tommy gun's ugly snout appeared and chattered. Bullets fairly rained through the truck at a point above the boiler plate. They rang constantly against the plate an instant later as the gunner tried to throw lead through the slot. "Hell!" came the voice again. "They got Dynamite!"

The red-head had suddenly slumped behind the wheel and the truck was running backward out of control. If it swung sideways towards the sedan, the gun would wipe them out to a man. "Yank Dyna-

mite into the back," Donnybrook yelled. At the same time he jammed on the brake and got the gears in neutral. As Dynamite's legs disappeared over the back of the driver's seat, Donnybrook slid in behind the wheel.

Some of the world's greatest generals had used the strategy he adopted in his desperation. When facing defeat—charge. He dropped the gears into low, eased in the clutch and opened the throttle wide.

The truck jumped ahead. The sedan was two hundred yards away when it started. When the sedan stopped but a hundred yards separated them. Donnybrook saw a frightened yellow face behind the bullet proof glass in the sedan's rear window. Lips moving told of orders given. The tommy gun's muzzle was so close the CCC man wondered if boiler plate could resist the lead.

It came with a murderous chatter and screaming lead. Fifty feet separated them when the sedan lunged ahead. And by that margin those within missed being knocked over the grade. From the first Donnybrook had a vague idea of crashing the sedan, but stopping the truck before it followed it into the gulch. In his desperation he didn't care much.

He was no Dynamite, but he could drive. The roar of the exhausts echoed through the great forest, and on the horse shoe curves when the side of the truck was visible, the sedan sent bursts from their weapon. But accuracy was impossible and the trunks of trees offered almost perfect protection.

"Where's this all goin' to end, Donnybrook?" one of them asked.

"At their hide-out, likely," Donnybrook answered. "They've got to make a stand. This road cuts into a second road that runs to the highway, but there're trees across it. They can't get through. How's Dynamite?"

"He's in bad shape," the other answered. "A bullet musta drilled him between the eyes."

THE road suddenly turned from a frothing stream and crossed a heavily timbered bench. Three truck roads branched at this point. Once, motor trucks had taken out cedar trees, but now brush grew high between the wheel tracks. Flattened brush indicated which road the sedan had taken. Donnybrook dropped a man off to give instructions to cars following, then crowded the sedan hard.

Abruptly the tracks turned from the road to a small clearing. He jammed on the brakes, then backed from view as bullets mowed down brush, leaves and even saplings. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a man carrying a black bag, running to a cabin built of heavy logs; and of another racing from the sedan, which had been hastily abandoned a hundred feet from the cabin door.

The shots, Roughhouse Dugan decided, came from the man in the cabin. "Listen, what's that?" he asked sharply as the truck stopped.

A high pitched, resentful voice came from the cabin: "I ain't worth even a cent. Shoot the bums! Kill 'em, wood ticks. Don't worry about Papa Moe!"

"The game little guy," Roughhouse exclaimed. He jumped into the rear of the truck and examined Dynamite. The latter was breathing, but the wound between the eyes looked bad. "It's a job for a doctor and a damned good one, but I'll see what I can do," he said. "There'll be somebody with the G-Men sure."

"What'll we do?" one of the boys asked.

"Drop a tree across the road and block that sedan," Roughhouse ordered. "That'll keep them from piling into it and rushing us."

While some of the men were dropping the tree, Donnybrook circled the clearing, keeping a wary eye on the cabin. It was obvious the original locater of this particular timber claim had complied with the law, but stopped there.

There was no large clearing, with fruit trees and overgrown garden area so often found in the vicinity of abandoned cabins. Big timber stood within a hundred feet of the building. A hundred and fifty feet away towered a two hundred foot fir, straight as the proverbial arrow. It was a massive stick, a good seven feet in diameter at the butt. There wasn't a limb three quarters of the distance from the ground.

The base of this tree, Donnybrook observed, was visible from the cabin.

"And if it wasn't visible," Roughhouse suggested, joining him, "you'd have a swell idea."

Their eyes met and again Donnybrook was impressed with the keen, quick mind that lay behind Roughhouse's eyes. "I think it's a swell idea anyway," Dugan added. "The Forest Service taught you how to drop a tree—and lay it right where you wanted to, didn't it?"

Chapter V

"TIMBER-R-R-R!"

AN HOUR after the CCC truck arrived, three carloads of G-Men and sundry other individuals appeared. A mild appearing man who resembled a young business man enjoying a holiday approached and introduced himself. "I am Curry," he informed them. It was sufficient.

"*The* Curry!" Roughhouse asked. "Of the G-Men."

"Yes, and I've seen you somewhere before," Curry answered. "I can't place you right now, but——" He smiled, revealing strong teeth. "You boys have done a first rate job. Do you think you can finish it?"

"We'd like to," Donnybrook said quickly.

"We'll have to blast them out with bombs and machine guns," Curry said. "That's a strong cabin and it is going to take a lot of blasting. They're facing the noose and know it. It'll be a hard fight."

"And you'll lose men and Ganz will be killed," Donnybrook said. "Why not let the C-Men drive them into the open? It is right down our street!"

"They have piled sandbags in front of the windows," Curry commented. "No chance of picking them off. How will you boys do it—start a brush fire?"

"No, the logs are too damp. The cabin won't catch on fire," Donnybrook explained. "Besides we don't want to start a brush fire at this time of the year. We'll get them into the open if you'll handle them."

"Go ahead! Once in the clear, they'll quit cold. They dish it out, but they can't take it."

Donnybrook and three of his companions sized up the big tree, then held a brief discussion. Others joined them and presently a gang was hard at work falling nearby trees. It was an hour before the crashing ended. Logs were rolled against the fallen trunks until the base of the big tree was protected against gunfire from the cabin.

"Now what?" Curry asked.

"Keep your shirt on," Roughhouse advised, "the boys are doing fine."

Donnybrook sized up the big tree, then began an undercut. From time to time he thrust the head of his faller's axe into the cut. The head served as the base, the axe handle the perpendicular of a square. With the head snugly in the cut, he was able to sight along the handle and thus gauge the spot where the tree would fall.

"You don't think you can hit the cabin with that tree, do you?" Curry demanded incredulously.

"A good faller can," Donnybrook replied.

"I don't believe it," Curry insisted. "Ten to one you don't come within five feet of the cabin."

"What odds will you give me on hitting the chimney?" Donnybrook countered.

"Twenty to one," Curry answered promptly.

"I'll take it." Donnybrook turned to one of his companions. "Take up a collection. We've got to raise five bucks."

THE CCC man was gone some time, but returned with a heap of nickels, dimes and quarters. "Fifty cents of that came out of Dynamite's pocket," he explained. "If he was conscious he'd want to be in on the deal so I frisked him."

Curry covered the amount with ten ten-dollar bills.

When the undercut was finished, two men with a cross-cut saw began to work from the opposite side. As the saw ate in Donnybrook drove the thin faller's wedges into the cut. This kept the saw from binding and also aided in directing the fall.

Men surrounded the place, but there was no sound save the shush-shush of the saw and ring of hammer against wedge. An odd silence filled the cabin—a tenseness close to the breaking point—Lifer and his companions having concluded that the tree-falling was G-Men strategy to enable the attackers to get in closer.

From deep within the giant trunk came the snapping of fibers giving way under the strain. The top leaned a good three feet off center. Definitely the tree was falling. "That's enough," Donnybrook presently shouted. He sized up the tree and began driving in the wedges. The top began to sweep slowly across the sky and from Donnybrook's lungs came the old warning of a falling tree. "Timber-r-r-r!"

Those about the tree ran for safety. The G-Men's fingers tensed on machine gun triggers, but their cool eyes watched the tree top, now a mighty green broom brushing at the clouds. Suddenly the cabin door gave way before the impact of a hurtling body.

Moe Ganz, arms lashed to his side, shot forth like a projectile. He struck the ground, but managed to get to his feet and staggered for the timber. Almost at the same instant the falling tree scattered the chimney stones of the cabin and sheared through the roof. The whole edifice collapsed as the wall logs were knocked spinning.

Lifer and his companions crawled from the wreckage. Their faces were ashen and their hands shook so violently they could hardly keep them up. G-Men rushed in and surrounded them, but the CCC men ranged themselves about Moe Ganz. Donnybrook slashed the ropes binding his arms. Moe hurled his arms aloft and then mopped his brow. "Phooie, such a business! From the picture Cedar Shingles I remembered a faller could put a tree anywhere, and right away I knew what was coming. So I says, Papa Moe had better take a chance and smash through the door. A machine gun bullet maybe could be dodged, but a tree—no!"

"The wood ticks turned the trick," Curry said, coming up at that moment. "From start to finish they planned the job and we let them."

"They were going to murder me," Ganz explained.

"We knew it," Donnybrook said. "We haven't forgotten the break you gave the CCC and this was our chance to show it."

"May be you'd like the world premiere on Cedar Shingles," Moe suggested.

"That'd be swell," Donnybrook exclaimed, "but we haven't any sound apparatus at the Indian River camp."

"Maybe you'd like a new picture machine with sound apparatus," Moe suggested. "With love and kisses from Papa Moe! And if you say thank you, I'll say——"

"Phooie!" Roughhouse Dugan said with a grin.

"What puzzles me," Curry said, "is how you wood ticks got on the trail so quickly."

"I can answer that," a pale, groggy CCC man with red hair replied. "No, Donnybrook, don't get scared, I'm not going to die. It was only a bit of lead that struck me between the eyes. I'm all right."

DONNYBROOK eased Dynamite Kelly to a convenient log, then did the talking. "This lug's a CCC truck driver and he's been stuck in every mud hole on the Olympic Peninsula—knows 'em by their first names. This man Roughhouse tossed broken glass in the road and the flat tire the mob got jolted mud from the rim. One look at the mud was enough for Dynamite."

"Yep," the redhead declared, "it was black muck, mixed with brake fern and Oregon grape. There was only one mud hole like it—on the Beaver Creek road. And we took it."

"There's only one thing I'm sorry about," Donnybrook said as Moe Ganz seated himself in a car with the G-Men. "And this is Stan Dvorak wasn't in on this crime. It sure would have given us something to talk about if we'd worked with him."

Roughhouse Dugan smiled softly, scrawled a note, handed it to Donnybrook, then jumped into the car with Moe Ganz just as it started away.

"Where does that mug Dugan think he's going?" Dynamite demanded. "And what does the note say?"

"My sainted aunt's bustle!" Donnybrook exclaimed. "Get a load of this."

They grouped around Donnybrook and stared at Roughhouse Dugan's note. It read:

"Dear Gang:

If working with Stan Dvorak will give you something to talk about, well—start right in.

Stan Dvorak."

Curry whistled softly. "I knew I'd seen that fellow somewhere. There was something mighty familiar around the eyes."

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